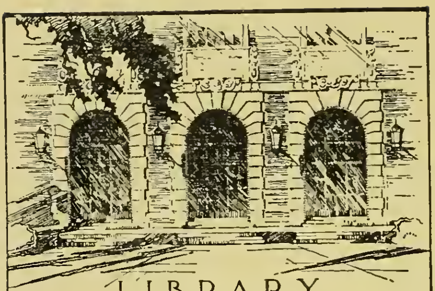

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COUSINS

BY

L. B. WALFORD

AUTHOR OF 'MR SMITH: A PART OF HIS LIFE'
AND 'PAULINE'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
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CONTENTS OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

PART IV.

CHAP. PAGE

XIII. "A BETTER MAN, SIR, I NEVER KNEW," . . 3

XIV. "WHAT A FRIGHT HE GAVE ME," . . . 26

XV. OUTWITTED, ... 44

XVI. ROWING HOME, ... 65

PART V.

XVII. "IT WAS FOR HESTER'S OWN SAKE I DID IT," 91

XVIII. "I NEVER WANT TO SEE HIS FACE AGAIN," . 108

XIX. IT WAS NOT HESTER'S WAY, ... 126

XX. "THEY ARE ENTERING ON A PERIOD OF ENDLESS FELICITY," 145

PART VI.

XXI. AFTER THE FESTIVAL, ... 169
XXII. "I HAVE WON HER BACK SO FAR," . . 189
XXIII. A SECOND MEETING BY THE RIVER, . . 207
XXIV. INTERRUPTED, ... 228

PART VII.

XXV. "I HAVE LOST ALL BUT MY HONOUR!". . 253
XXVI. HESTER PLAYS HER PART, ... 270

PART IV.

COUSINS.

CHAPTER XIII.

"A BETTER MAN, SIR, I NEVER KNEW."

"The world is in general selfish, interested, and unthinking, and throws the imputation of romance and melancholy on every temper more susceptible than its own. I cannot but think that in those regions which I contemplate, those feelings will subsist,—they are called, perhaps they are, weaknesses here; but there may be some better modifications of them in heaven, which may deserve the name of virtues."—MAN OF FEELING.

OF a certain kind of world Simon Lutteridge had seen a good deal; into another, of which we shall presently speak, he had never yet penetrated.

From his earliest days he had been habituated to society—to mixing with people of different nations and of different grades—to seeing life, in short, though it was life under a single aspect.

He had never been wild; he had never been wicked.

He was a serious, even a devoutly minded man, who knew in what he believed, and acted up to what he professed, with a certain simple, dogged straightforwardness that either kept aloof from him such as did not lead a decent life, or forced them in his presence to assume that they did.

He was generally known to be religious; but as he was also a so-called good fellow, and, as we have said, a lenient—not to say lax—commanding officer, his religion was respected even by those from whom he had not sympathy.

But for all that, Simon was, when approaching forty, conscious of an unsatisfactoriness in his existence. He had a heart, and it was slowly withering up for want of nourishment. Year after year brought the same interests, the same recreations, the same frigid routine. It was a dry solemn progress through the world; and though it may perhaps be urged that he had made it so for himself, that he had cut out his own pathway, none the less did he in secret fret over it.

Had a high command and military honours been likely to fall to his lot while still in the service, these would probably have formed a goal for his ambition—a something to look to; had an ardent missionary spirit inspired his bosom, it might have expanded in a large sphere of usefulness. But here was a plain soldier who did his duty, took care that the regimental school was well taught and properly attended, backed up the chaplain in whatever he undertook, was regular as clockwork in his attendance at church and sacraments, and gave openly and in secret at all times and places. He had not exalted aspirations, but such as he had he carried out, at whatever cost to himself. "A better man, sir, I never knew," said little Winter, the chaplain, when, years afterwards, he too came back to this country. "A less obtrusive, less pretentious, more honestly upright Christian never lived. Why, sir, that man's influence *told*,—it couldn't help telling, whatever they may say. Talk about his not keeping the regiment in order—it was a regiment that wouldn't be kept in order! Not by a man like Lutteridge. They wanted a Czar, or a Shah, or a Khan of Tartary over them. See how they shook into shape under that little beast Jones. A little beast he was, I tell you—a regular little vagabond. But he made them all look about them before they knew where they were! Snapped them up right and left as if they had been schoolboys! Lutteridge, now, couldn't do that; he *could not* do it. It was no use his attempting it—it was not in the man's nature. He could not say 'No,' if 'Yes' was possible, to save his life! Weakness? Well, it may have been weakness—I am not saying that he was a man of ability, that he was a particularly strong-minded man—but this I do say, it was a weakness that never interfered with his sense of duty. I have seen him smarting under the obligation to give a reproof, ready to give the world if he could but back out of it with a good conscience, but not one bit would he shirk, if it was before him as a case of right and wrong. He hated to speak—that was the truth; unless you could lay it down to him clear as the day that it *was* a case of right and wrong, he would hold his tongue. As long as he could, he would shut his eyes. But that was his only fault. Never did he shut his ears—no, that he did not—to the needy or the oppressed." Here good Winter would shake his head and wipe his eyes, struck with his own eloquence. "Why, sir," he would go on, warm-ing up again, "that man would give and give, till there was no end to it! I have, I do assure you, felt ashamed to come to him sometimes, having been so often, and maybe I would be hanging back a bit"—the worthy chaplain in colloquial moments resumed his native brogue—"and he would see it in my face,—he could be quick enough at times, Lutteridge could, and he would say, just as pleasant as if he had never heard a word of the sort before, 'Well, Winter,' he would say—'Well, Winter, and how much is it now?' with his hand in his pocket before I could answer. Wherever that man went, God's blessing would go with him, for his prayers and his alms have gone up like those of Cornelius, or I know nothing of the Holy Gospel."

So spoke Winter; and, speaking with all the warmth of conviction, it may be supposed that he knew. Another testimony bore out something at least of what he averred. "Lutteridge," said young Carlton, who left not long after the new *régime* was inaugurated, and while yet the days of mourning in the regiment were not ended—"Lutteridge had the dryest, stiffest manner, and the kindest heart of any fellow I have ever met."

But of the existence of this heart Simon was himself hardly aware.

He was conscious of a want—a void which he had no notion how to fill; and in breaking up his whole scheme of life, and turning towards the home of his childhood, he carried with him a vague hope that he should there find wherewith to satisfy his silent cravings.

His farewells once said, his spirits rose in the anticipation.

Even the independent mode of travel, the having only himself to consult and look after, was a luxury. Stepping down, so to speak, from the platform on which he had so long been the focus for six hundred pair of eyes, was an untold relief.

He could now do what he chose, go where he liked, without giving warning and making arrangements for contingencies which always might happen, and seldom did.

He was now at large, responsible to nobody, an example to nobody, a terror to nobody,—he still fondly hoped that sometimes he had been a terror,—whilst a bulwark and rock of defence, though he scarcely durst arrogate to himself as much, he could not but know he had actually been to many.

How easy seemed the transit from place to place, now that he had no longer a great unwieldy tail of human beings to draggle after him! How glorious to be free, bound to no hours,—at peace, subject to no interruptions! To be no longer a colonel, but simply a traveller! To sink from something into nothing!

Under the new influence there began to peep out indications of a change of temperature—a thaw in Simon's deportment. No longer watched, understood, and made allowances for, he found it almost agreeable to have to go out of his way to make friends. Formerly all who desired to know Colonel Lutteridge—and who that had the opportunity but did desire it?—had to be brought to him, and to make their own impression. As to the impression he made on them, it had never occurred to him to think of it; he was as free from vanity as he was from solicitude. He did not think himself attractive; his manner he was wont to consider especially unfortunate; but as none of the slights which fall to the lot of underlings could ever have been offered to him, he could not know diffidence. He deplored his formality and reticence, but more on account of the effect of these on others than for any other reason.

Such a thing as his evincing anxiety to make an acquaintance was unheard of: he had lived on such a pedestal, that ere a wish of that kind was barely formed it would be discovered and gratified. It was therefore altogether new to him, feeling himself unknown, and comparatively little accounted of, to have occasionally to make the advances which some one must make if people are to come together at all.

To be sure, he was not a man to be passed over anywhere; but nevertheless he was, during his homeward voyage, not the personage he had been—not what he would become, directly on his arrival at Lutteridge.

No regretful and condoling countenances followed him about; no expressive silences showed that suspicions as to the cause of his removal were rife. He was—unspeakable comfort—with people who did not *know*. His affairs were not their common talk. He was nothing to them. Nothing at least, except as being a fellow-passenger, interesting, reserved, and shy. There was no barricade to keep intruders off his sacred person, and accordingly, in spite of his gravity, his silence, and his buckram, he found himself gaining in popularity every day.

His good looks in themselves won him the hearts of the women; and of these, two half-fledged pretty things of fourteen and twelve were his especial favourites. Though at an awkward age, they were not awkward; though undeveloped, they were not rustic.

They were a cheery, blithe young pair, budding into beauty, and full of that frank coquetry which is the charm of happy girlhood.

With them our soldier had many a pleasant hour; they taught him to be merry,—he could not teach them to be grave. He teased them; they played him tricks. He learned the secret of their hearts, their invincible horror of being treated as children; and holding this key, he made use of it — shabby wretch — against the innocent blabbers themselves.

They had no mother; and the prim *gouvernante* who tyrannised over them afforded an endless amusement to Simon in this respect. She could not pursue them into the actual presence of "cet fort bel homme, M. le Colonel," nor flout them openly when he was by, but she could cast a shadow over their mirth from afar, and take it out of them in the depths of her secret presence-chamber afterwards.

The abject air of the pretty couple, as they slunk off when the time came to this curtain-lecture, was deliciously ludicrous in their champion's eyes. He would pull his long moustache and laugh to himself as he looked after them, and prepare afresh his next homily on the subject.

Their resentment, their small *amour propre*, their attempts at dignity, were more diverting than anything he had ever known ; and as they made no secret of their partiality for him, he was almost as much flattered as amused.

Such an experience had never before fallen to his lot. He parted from them with a sense of desolation, and an avidity for more of the same kind of nourishment, if it could be had.

Their companionship had opened a way into his inner man, and the gap was still yawning when he met his cousins.

Agatha and Jane were too old, his niece was too young. He wanted a playmate, but something beyond a baby. His eye fell on Hester ; and albeit that she was different from the two fairies who had charmed him before, she took his fancy quickly.

In all that had followed their first meeting, he had no idea that he had passed beyond the bounds of what might be ceded to so near a relation. They were of one blood, one kin. This, he thought, should be weighted against the few years that she was older than his former little friends: they had sat with him, one on each side, by the hour together, Mademoiselle being often incapacitated for exertion, and in her heart too thankful to have them taken off her hands; they had accepted toys from him, and given him in return treasures to be kept for their sakes, and we will not say to what lengths they had proceeded when the doleful hour of parting arrived. He had, he thought, a right to something of the same freedom of intercourse with his young cousin.

But behold! his young cousin was more than a match for him. It might be all very well to try over again the same kind of talk which had tormented and delighted the children on board the Orinoco, but he was not prepared to find himself in turn affected. That he was playing with edge-tools, and might not only wound but himself get wounded in the sport, did not for a moment cross his mind. His cousin was his cousin, and she was a child, and he was approaching the meridian of life; he saw no earthly reason why he should not pet his favourite. For him all was safe enough, and as for her, any care on her account would have seemed in his eyes the presumptuous supposition of a coxcomb.

He did not yet know Hester. He had so far seen only an apt, intelligent, charming companion, with a pair of grey eyes, in which every fleeting thought was instantly mirrored. They spoke for her, laughed for her, frowned for her, and at times, alas! they betrayed their mistress.

And then it must be owned that our colonel, though not a man of talent, had a natural genius for love-making. Where he had hidden it for twenty past years, or why it had up to the present time existed in a purely dormant state, must ever be a mystery. So soon as he gave it rein, so soon as he began to exercise his faculty, it was astonishing the progress he made in the art. He knew exactly when to speak and when to hold his tongue, was complete master of those furtive looks, those intelligent indefinable nothings which convey meaning to the one, and to the one alone, for whom they are intended. He was never at a loss, never put out, never taken aback. His phlegmatic countenance could wear, when he so chose, an expression which defied inquiry; his dignity overawed intrusion, and his speech let out nothing.

Constance, not more penetrating than other people where self was concerned, was delighted with the cool preference so openly manifested by her brother-in-law for the cousin of whom she was least afraid. "Hester, you know, is the favourite," she now imagined herself saying on the first opportunity. "Hester, my dears, has cut you all out in his good graces. The truth is, she is but a child, and Simon, between ourselves, is a woman-hater." Or, "My dear Agatha, what have you been about not to fascinate our Colonel? He amuses himself with Hester."

Neither she nor he dreamed of the depths of the waters thus troubled. They looked at the little maid's brisk youthful face, and had no conception of the nature which underlay it. It is, to be sure, an unusual thing to see brought up in a homely, old-fashioned family, a daughter who does not easily and harmoniously fall in with the ways of her people. Trained to think and feel after one approved fashion; holding intercourse with minds all of one stamp; breathing one atmosphere, and guarded from every untoward influence,—it is a curiosity to find a meditative, original, audacious mind like Hester's. She would not have dared, even had she known how, to give expression to the thoughts which often filled her soul. Everything beyond her grasp, incomprehensible, unfathomable, had immediate attraction, and she was at an age when fancy, tyrannical and lawless, holds reason in check.

Then comes Colonel Lutteridge, strikes the fancy with an electric shock, lays hold on midnight musings, and extends his grasp still further. The heart-strings will be touched before she is aware; and as for him, he scarcely believes in her having them yet. Which come first—heart-strings or wisdom-teeth? Who knows? His wisdom-teeth have come and gone so long ago that he forgets all about them; but, so far, he has had no experience of that other possession. He is not inclined to give little Hester credit for having outstripped him.

Truth to tell, he never prys into such matters; and this is the world—the world of thought, study, and reflection—into which he has never set his foot.

He rises on the last morning of his cousin's visit with an unaccountable disinclination to the parting, but with an easy conscience. In reply to Agatha's gay, "I am come to take Hester home," he says, "Must she go? Oh!" pulls his long moustache, and looks kindly at Hester, but is unable to think of any argument in favour of her remaining.

It must not be supposed that during the week no communication had been held with Wancote. The ladies from Lutteridge had driven over there twice, and each time Hetty's heart had palpitated with joy at finding herself safely reseated in Constance's carriage. She had feared to be kidnapped, or, at least, to have a day of her visit curtailed; but not to have gone—not to have looked in at least twice during her absence—was out of the question. Then Jane and her mother had called once at the Manor, and Agatha had walked over by herself the day before the concert.

The concert was mentioned by Simon, and

perhaps there had been a momentary expectation on Agatha's part of being asked to join the party. To be sure, since Lord Westmacott was going—a fact which Constance hastened to make known, the carriage would be full; and the weather was not such as to make it agreeable for any one, least of all for a man just arrived from India, to go outside on a six-miles' drive. It was fully three miles each way; November nights are dark and raw; she could not expect any one to volunteer such a proposal; she only felt that if by any chance Lord Westmacott should fail, she would not object to taking his place.

Since Lord Westmacott, however, had been there, and since he was actually at the breakfast table when she made her appearance, she had nothing to complain of.

Breakfast was later at Lutteridge than at Wancote; they had not yet finished—the gentlemen were enjoying their second cups of coffee when Miss Manners was ushered in.

It was in reply to Constance's "Why so soon?" that Agatha made answer, "I am come to take Hester back."

She had then to explain that she had been seeing Bertie to the station—Bertie had gone off on a round of visits—and it had occurred to those at home that she should look in and fetch Hester afterwards; it was going to be a wet day, and more horses than were necessary need not be taken out.

Hetty's feeble protest, "But, Agatha, I am not ready—I have nothing packed," was easily overruled.

"Of course I know that, dear. I have sent the carriage round. I knew Constance would let me stay a little."

Constance jumped up. "Now do, Agatha, just go back and say this is all nonsense. Hester is not thinking of going home to-day. You just give Aunt Manners my love, and say we can't spare her."

"Yes, do," said Simon, coming forward—a great step for him. "There are so many of you at home, she can't be missed very much."

"I will drive her over on Tuesday or Wednesday," added his sister-in-law.

But all in vain. Agatha was smiling and resolute. She had been sent there, she said, to fetch Hester, and Hester knew as well as she, that since that was the case there was nothing more to be said. She had no authority, she protested, to give her sister leave to stay; and there was that in her tone which Hester durst not disregard. She had had her lesson the week before, and was not likely to set Agatha at nought again for a while.

"You are only wasting time," said Miss Manners, gently.

Even Constance saw that protestations were unavailing; and while laughingly denouncing the cruelty of such a proceeding, bade Hester go. As she left the room, a movement of Colonel Lutteridge's seemed as though he would have followed, but he checked himself, if such had been his purpose, and returned to the dregs of his coffee.

These he was still thoughtfully stirring, when she reappeared, fully equipped. He gave a quick look up, but the presence of others, as usual, held him in check, and instead of expressing regrets at her going, or even coming forward to stand among the rest who were now exchanging farewells, he busied himself in feeding his dog, and talking to him, until summoned by Constance to see the sisters to their carriage.

He led the way then, with Agatha; but just at the last came a consolatory moment. He took the cloak off Hester's arm and wrapped her in it, and then he did say, "I am so sorry you are going," in a tone of voice perfectly inaudible to the lady who was already sitting in the brougham.

Agatha alone smiled, and bent forward as they drove away, and Simon returned to Lord Westmacott.

Lord Westmacott had got as far as the hall, with the intention of paying parting civilities to the young ladies, but something there had attracted his attention, and he had only reached the door in time to wave his hand, and bow distractedly in reply to Miss Manners's graceful movement forward, as the carriage whirled away.

He now wanted explanations and attention.

"What is this extraordinary production, Lutteridge?"

"A fish's nest."

"And this? And this?"

They were soon in full career round the hall, handling and examining curiosities.

"Hester's gone," cried little Ellen, running in. "Oh, why did Hester go?"

"Eh? My little girl, take care!" said Lord Westmacott. "This your niece, Lutteridge? Bless me, what a delicate-looking little thing! Not the least like her mother!"

"Why did Hester go?" repeated the child, looking up at her uncle.

"I don't know, Nelly," said he, kindly. "I suppose she had to go."

"She has gone to her mamma, you know," added Lord Westmacott, condescendingly. "She is as glad to go to her mamma as you would be to go to yours, I daresay."

"Was Hester glad?" said Ellen.

"Well, I don't know; I suppose so. That your grandfather, Lutteridge? Fine-looking old gentleman."

"Was Hester glad?" repeated the child, laying hold of her uncle's hand.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because she did not seem glad, and I'm so very, very sorry. I wanted her to sing hymns to me all day to-morrow. Don't you like when Hester sings hymns, and you take me on your knee, Uncle Simon?"

He did not show that he had heard the question, and by-and-by she ran away again.

It was long ere Hester had another chance of singing hymns to the little girl. "It is not her turn to go," Lady Manners said when the next invitation came from Lutteridge. "She can be the one to dine at the Parker's next week. And here is that absurd little Mrs Martin asking one of you and a brother. Really she must be taught if she knows no better. Such a note!" (Reading.) "'One of your daughters and one of your sons.' Well, Agatha, if you or Jane wish to go, you can, but I cannot have Hetty taken out in that way. If either of you elder ones choose to accept, Jem can take you."

"I don't think either of us would care to go," said Agatha. "Would you, Jane?"

Jane was equally unwilling, and an excuse had to be found. None so simple as to ask the cousins from Lutteridge for the same evening; but the cousins had already been bespoken by Mrs Martin herself.

They had consented to go—Constance because, to do her justice, she was devoid of airs of superiority, and if great people were not to be had, did not disdain small; Simon because he had no other engagement, and with him such calls were obligatory. A glimmer of impatience was, however, manifested when the invitation to Wancote afterwards came in for the same evening. Wancote was undoubtedly to be preferred, and he said so, Constance agreeing outwardly, but in her heart his having originated such a sentiment caused her to look more favourably on the Martin entertainment than she had done before.

He had never till now said in so many words that he liked going to Wancote.

He went there pretty often, it is true, but he had invariably an errand, an arrangement to make, or a matter about which he required advice. Not unfrequently he only saw his uncle, choosing a time when Sir John was likely to be at home, and as often as not, when the rest of the party were most sure to be out. He would look in for about half an hour, making the father his avowed object, and it was but natural that Sir John should be consulted on points as to which his knowledge of country life must entitle him to be considered an authority.

But if Simon took to liking evenings at Wancote, that was another thing altogether.

She dressed for the Martins' "little rubbishy party," as she secretly designated it, in very good-humour, but she turned up her nose as she did so. She had done the best she could for Mrs Martin when she put forth her relations to give her consequence in Simon's eyes, as she had done on the occasion of his first arrival. An Irish baronet is not much, neither is a Welsh bishop; but upon these two minute pegs hung all Mrs Martin's claims to notice. One was her father, the other her uncle; and Constance had dinned the fact into Simon's ears.

In herself the lady was nothing. Neither was her husband; and he had not even the bishop and the baronet in the background. They were not likely to gather round them any people worth meeting.

CHAPTER XIV.

"WHAT A FRIGHT HE GAVE ME."

"Suspicions amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds,—they ever fly by twilight."—BACON.

EVERYTHING within and without the small domain of Oakbank was in apple-pie order by eight o'clock on the night of the dinner-party.

The result of many cares was now to be seen in a settled hush—the calm before the storm. The tiny drawing-room, fragrant with flowers, had had its furniture extracted till nothing remained but the piano, the sofa well pushed back into the bay-window, and a few easy-chairs standing anywhere and everywhere but in the places to which they were accustomed. The dining-room, with its table elongated till there was just room and no more for the servants to pass between Mrs Martin's chair and the sideboard, shimmered with silver and glass, wedding-gifts, and pretty toys of every description. A cloak-room, with a mirror draped in muslin, and the orthodox ivory toilet-set on the table in front, had been prepared for the ladies; and a similar but somewhat smaller den was duly set aside for the gentlemen. Everything within was complete, and the gravel was raked in front of the entrance-door.

Husband and wife, equally up to concert-pitch in their own persons, stood on each side of the drawing-room fire; she, in pink, with braided hair—he, shaven, brushed, starched, and stiff, in the highest of collars. It needed but to pour eau-de-cologne on his pocket-handkerchief, and finish could go no further.

"I wish they would come now," said she. "I begin to get nervous."

"I want my dinner," said he. "I hope it won't be spoilt."

"Furnival! *did* you get the coffee?"

"Good gracious, Katie, how you startled me! Why do you speak so quickly? I could not think what was coming."

"But did you get it? If not, I must fly——"

"Of course I got it; I went to Seeley on purpose. What did you suppose I went to Seeley for?"

"Oh, well, I forgot. But have you shown Hannah how to use the machine? You know she made a bungle of it last time."

"I know she did. I never tasted such stuff in my life."

"She will do the same again unless you show her how it ought to be made yourself."

"I have shown her,—in fact, I have put the coffee in and made everything ready. When the time comes, she only needs to light the lamp and pour in the boiling water."

He was invaluable. She had no further anxiety.

"Does not the room look nice?" she said, presently. These are the antimacassars Mrs Bell gave, Furnival. I think they are much the prettiest I have ever seen; and it was very kind of Mrs Bell to give them. The only pity is that they slip so," lifting one up as she spoke. "You saw that one? I think I shall turn this chair with its back to the wall; only if I do, Mr Searle will be sure to take it."

"And why should he not take it?"

"He always makes a chair in a mess."

"How can a chair be made in a mess?" said her husband, with a laugh of superior wisdom.

"There now, I will show you." With which the little housewife pulled forward the loose cover of the chair till it hung about the legs, and threw the tidy which she had in her hand down in a heap on the seat. "Now, if Mr Searle gets into this chair, that is what it will look like directly he gets up again. Only that half of the muslin will have disappeared down the back of the cushion here. He manages somehow to work it in and in, until once, when we had a tiny lace thing out, there was nothing but the edge—— O Furnival! A carriage!"

A pause and expectation.

"It is only a single horse, Furnival," in a whisper.

"Cab," in a whisper back.

"Searles?"

"Didn't come their way."

"Coulters. I heard the cloak-room door shut."

"I will go and bring him in."

"Oh no. Don't go, Furnival. They will come in together."

After the Coulters came the Bells, and after the Bells the Rector and Mrs Searle, and then a Mr Barry, and then a Mr Knight, and, last of all, Colonel Lutteridge and Mrs Robert Lutteridge.

Constance was in brilliant looks, and by no means above her company. To dazzle and condescend, provided there was no better sport on hand, suited her very well; and she rustled in to dinner on Mr Martin's arm, slipped into her seat, which was scarcely a pace from the fender, and sat there smiling and chatting throughout the meal, as though she neither felt heat nor cold, draughts, nor the occasional rub of an arm against her back hair.

Simon was not so engaging. He sat bolt upright; and although his person adorned the room, his tongue did little for the entertainment.

This was, however, no loss to the hostess. She had to keep one eye on the table and another on the servants. It would have been too much had she been expected to bestow one ear on Mr Searle and another on Colonel Lutteridge.

Mr Searle was bent on being agreeable. He was much taken with the bride, and was also—being a good-natured man—anxious to show that, although parson of the parish, he did not resent her having put him only on her left hand. He thought he had a right to the other.

It was he, not Colonel Lutteridge, who should have been helping the soup and the chickens; but since Mrs Martin wished to do honour to the Colonel, and since she was probably quite unaware that, in putting him up, she had put the Rector down, he was not the man to sulk. Having nothing to do, and only Mrs Coulter on his other side, he did not give his hostess much peace; while, for her, one man's talk was as good as another's, for although she had pronounced her right-hand neighbour to be the handsomest man she had ever seen, she might have made the remark of a marble column for all the desire she entertained for intercourse with him.

It was enough that he had come to her house, that he had been seen there, and that the Searles and the Coulters and the Bells, besides the odds and ends of young men, would all go away and tell that he had graced the party.

To have made everything complete, she reflected, Miss Manners, and her eldest brother—who was so much the better looking of the two, should have come in place of Mr Barry and Mr Knight.

These two unfortunates, hailed at the last moment, had taken each other in to dinner, and now sat on opposite sides about the middle of the table, indignant to find themselves let in for a party of only married people. One had expected to meet Miss Bell; the other had made sure that some sister, or cousin, or young lady friend of Mrs Martin's would be staying with her, and would be intrusted to his care.

Both thought they had been ill-treated, and although somewhat dashed, in their own phrase, by the presence of the lord of the manor and his handsome sister-in-law, whom they knew by sight, but to whose acquaintance they had never before aspired, they reflected that, after all, even Colonel Lutteridge was a widower, and the lady a widow. There was positively not a young person there, thought the two very young men.

Accordingly they partook but gloomily of all that went round, and were certainly, as Mrs Martin indignantly affirmed afterwards, "No acquisitions."

"We hoped to have had your cousins here to-night," said she, trying to interest her silent neighbour in a new topic. "We asked them, but they have another engagement."

"They have a dinner-party of their own," put in Mrs Coulter, bending forward from the other side of Mr Searle. She was always skirmishing up and down the table to see into whose dialogue she could insert an observation. "I'll tell you how I know, Mrs Martin," she continued, eagerly: "their side gate was open as we passed."

"I suspect that was our fault," said Colonel Lutteridge, as Mrs Martin, rather ashamed of her guest, made no reply.

"We drove in on our way here, and came out at the side gate," added he, in pity for the blush which he had seen and understood. It had been a vexed question between Mr and Mrs Martin whether the Coulters should be admitted or not; but several negatives coming in, and it being imperative that the Coulters must come some time or other, the controversy had ended in their being asked, with this proviso on Mrs Martin's part that they should be placed where they would be entirely in the background. She had not reckoned on the quickness of Mrs Coulter's ears and tongue.

"Indeed, Colonel Lutteridge?" replied that lady across the table. "The side gate by the Seeley road I mean."

"Ah, yes. I am afraid we forgot to shut it. We must stop on our way back."

Now what had he been doing at Wancote? There could not be much intimacy if he did not know that they were engaged that evening, and yet going in and out in that easy manner looked ominous. Mesdames Coulter and Martin, in common with the rest of the world, predicted a Lutteridge-Manners alliance, but since she durst not put point-blank questions, Mrs Coulter's greedy eyes searched in vain for any information on that head; and in the face of his obstinate silence afterwards, even Mrs Martin felt he was not by many degrees so handsome as she had at first declared him to be.

Unaware of the motive which had prompted him to cover her confusion, she avowed afterwards, resentfully, that the only time he had voluntarily opened his lips was when Wancote was alluded to; and to more than one confidential ear she whispered her opinion, that after all, however good-looking a countenance may be, when it has but one expression it grows tiresomely monotonous.

So monotonous, indeed, did the countenance referred to become before the evening was over, that Constance considered it was imperative on her to administer an admonition on the drive home. "Were you not well to-night, Simon?" she began, as soon as they turned from the door.

"Quite well. Why do you ask?"

"You looked so exceedingly bored."

"So I was."

"No wonder. So was I. But, you know, it hardly does to show it. They are harmless people after all, and if one does make up one's mind to go to their house, it is as well to get the credit of it."

"I don't understand. What credit?"

"I mean that, considering we go to their dinner-party on purpose to please the Martins, not for any enjoyment that we expect ourselves, it is a pity to spoil the effect when the sacrifice is actually made."

"It was stupid, of course," continued she, seeing that he made no response. "I am sure I agreed in everything that your face expressed."

"I did not mean my face to express anything."

"Did you not?" said his sister-in-law, coming to the point at last. "Then you should not write on it in blazing characters, 'I wish I were anywhere in the world but here.' That is what Hester would have said she saw if she had been there."

"If Hester had been there," said he, smartly, "she would have seen nothing of the kind."

"Hey-day! That is strong! Tell me honestly now, Simon, was it because none of them were present that you were out of humour—that you found the evening so dull? If any of the cousins had been there, would it have made a difference?"

"Any of them? No. It would if Hester had."

"It would if Hester had!"

"Yes, decidedly. I wanted Hester. I have not seen her for some time."

"Was that why you made me go in to Wancote on our way, that you might see your friend?"

"Yes. And get her to walk with me to-morrow."

"My dear Simon!"

"Well?"

"It's not—proper."

"How not proper?"

"You can't go walking about with young ladies like that."

"But she is my cousin."

"That makes some difference, but not enough. You will have to be taught *les convenances,* sir, the usages of society, the manners and customs of the natives. No girl of Hester's age walks about even with a cousin of the other sex, unless she has some one with her."

"But Jem is coming too."

"Jem? Why did you not say so before? Of course if Jem goes it is all right."

"Oh yes—I asked Jem," responded the offender, relieved. "But, Constance, I am afraid I must have transgressed before, unwittingly, for when Hester was at Lutteridge we walked together several times."

"That is different. She was staying in the house with you, and I suppose you kept to the grounds pretty much. You were not met by people. Don't you see, of course it is not the thing itself—there is no harm whatever in the thing itself—it is merely the look of it."

"But there is no harm in the thing itself?"

"No, no—certainly not. Many people would not be so particular as Aunt Manners, either. I must tell you, Simon, that Aunt Manners is a person you have to be very careful with. If

Jem should fail, you must not think of marching about alone with Hester."

"I'll ask Agatha."

"Agatha?" said Constance, slowly; and in her heart she thought, "Aha! This looks more like the point now!" "Why Agatha?" she said aloud.

"To put all straight. Agatha is a sort of chaperon, you see."

A chaperon? Was the man mad? Agatha—the family star, the pride and beauty of all the Manners race—to be termed a chaperon! Or was he merely seeking to mislead, to put her off the track?

She thought it best to laugh. "My dear Simon, that is beyond everything! Agatha a chaperon! Ha, ha, ha!" After which she waited with some curiosity for what was next to follow.

"That is what she always seems to me," he said. "No disrespect to Agatha. I am a chaperon myself, of course. I have had to chaperon lots of ladies in India; their fathers and husbands used to ask me to take care of them when they had to go to the hills, when I was quite a young fellow. Coming home, I had two of the nicest little girls in the world to look after; they were with an old governess, and she was ill half the time; so I am quite an old hand, you see. Some people get into the way of it, and I thought Agatha seemed one of those."

"So you two chaperons are to go out together?"

"With only one ewe lamb to look after." He seemed amused at the idea.

"Seriously, Simon, if it would be improper for you to be met walking about the country alone with Hester, it would be doubly, trebly so with Agatha."

"Would it?"

"It really would."

"Why?"

"Why?" said Constance, rather at a loss. "I can hardly explain why. She is so well known, and so remarkable looking, and so entirely grown up; while Hetty is little more than a school girl. You really must not ask Agatha."

"But I have no intention of asking Agatha."

"Oh, I thought you had."

"Only if Jem failed; and since you tell me that I must not look upon her in the light of a substitute, I have given up the idea of asking her at all. Hester is the one I want; she is lively, and amuses me."

"Brightens us all up, does she not? I am charmed that you agree with me in my fancy for Hetty. She is quite *my* child. We always get on so well together; I don't know how it is, but I never can get on so well with Agatha and Jane."

"Oh, they are all nice," said he, good-naturedly.

"Nice? Oh yes. Certainly they are nice, but they are such solemn, pretentious girls. I never feel sure how they will take a thing." She was now much less guarded as to her real sentiments than she had been at first. Since it was clear that he was heart-whole so far, she might, she thought, venture on what would have been too dangerous ground formerly. "Aunt Manners is bad enough," continued she, confidentially, "but really Agatha is worse. And I always feel that every little thing one does or says gets reported to the upper ranks—to the parents, aunts, uncles, and elder people generally. Now I call that mean. There should be honour among thieves, they say; and among cousins many little things pass that are never meant to transpire. But one cannot trust Agatha. She often gets Hetty into hot water, I know."

"Does she? What a naughty Hetty to deserve it."

"Ah! you are thinking of the trick she played you the other day. Well, you bear her no grudge, and that is about the worst she ever does. She gets into tremendous spirits, and they boil over now and then. Then Agatha will be looking on as cool as a lump of ice,—even when she is out for a holiday she keeps all her wits about her, never spoils her clothes nor says a word she should not, and, like a spectre of propriety in armour, keeps watch over all who do. You may think that Aunt Manners delights in such a daughter? But to my certain knowledge Hetty is the favourite. Agatha is very useful—and Agatha being the most noticed and admired, it must be a great relief to find her such a piece of moral perfection—but Hester is the mother's darling. She nearly kept her in the schoolroom for another year, however. I think she would have shown her sense if she had."

"Well, why did she not?"

"The boys made a fuss, and there was an alarm that she was growing eccentric. It would never do for one of those girls to be singular,—we leave such excrescences to the *bourgeoisie;* with them I believe it is quite the correct thing to have a daughter who goes her own way, manages her own concerns, and gets talked about. Our girls do as they are bid, and walk in the steps of their forefathers."

Not having been herself brought up precisely in such steps, it was pleasant to Constance to associate herself in phrases like these with the girls she spoke of.

"What made them think there was anything eccentric about her?"

"It was the greatest nonsense. She is at the age of romance and Scott's novels, and promulgated a little high-flown contempt for the stupidity of society as it now is—dinner-parties, such as we have just come from, especially. I don't wonder at the child a bit; she likes a dance as well as anybody; but we never have anything but dinners, dinners, dinners, all the year round, because Aunt Manners sets the example. Always the same people too. There is never any chance of meeting a face one does not know. Hester was delighted to come to that party I gave in your honour, because she wanted to see *you*. You were the attraction. I believe she thought of you as a sort of crusader or paladin—a mysterious being with all the halo of the East around your brow. India with Hester is the India of old, not the India of to-day. She has read books on it that would make my head ache; and she gave me such a tirade on Vedas, and Shasters, and Brahmins, and what not, the other day, that I have hardly yet recovered! I believe it was some idea of traditionary glory adhering to you that made her come to Lutteridge at all that night, for, as I said, she hated all the dinner-parties she went to before."

"I understood it was her first."

"Was it?" said Constance, who as usual had rattled on without adhering either to the letter or the spirit of the law. "Well, I am sure I have heard her rail at them often. It must have been from what she had heard, not what she had seen, I suppose."

"Stick to Hester," added she, mentally. "As much about her as you like. But no 'chaperons' are needed, Monsieur le Colonel. We will do without chaperons, if you please. A plague upon the man—what a fright he gave me!"

CHAPTER XV.

OUTWITTED.

"The fire i' the flint
Shews not till it be struck."
—*Timon of Athens.*

The walking-party had been altered and increased before the arrival of its originator on the following day.

Miss Manners and Jane had on their hats as well as Hester, and Mr Edward Searle, the Rector's son, who had just been ordained to a small living in the neighbourhood, and who had been dining at Wancote on the night before, summoned thither on the defection of the two cousins, was professing his readiness to join in the expedition at the moment Colonel Lutteridge entered the room. He had not, the young man said, been to Barley Hill for years, and as Barley

Hill was the object of the walk, it was plain that nothing could have fitted in better.

Several others were present—in fact the whole family were assembled—discussing plans for the afternoon, and for some minutes it did not exactly appear what had been fixed on. Mr Searle was duly presented to Colonel Lutteridge, named as a very old friend,—and Constance was inquired after. There was a great amount of talking going on, orders were given and countermanded; and to Simon, just come from a house where two solitary people — if such a phrase may be permitted—each went their way, with no dependence on the other, it was bewildering. He did not understand who was to be with him, and who was not. He stood by, taking no part, until Jem, after rushing in and out of the room a dozen times, as was his wont when any event was in anticipation, at length announced himself ready, and proceeded to hasten his sisters, with the haste of a man never in time himself.

Agatha, Jane, and Mr Searle obeyed the summons, and passed out one after another; but Hester sat still. "Come along, Hester," cried her cousin, cheerfully, as he waited by the doorway to follow her out.

"Hester is going to drive me in the pony-cart," replied Lady Manners for her daughter. "I am getting too old to drive myself, am I not, Hetty?"

Looking at Hester, he saw there was something wrong; he could just catch a glimpse of an angry lip trembling ere she turned her head aside.

"Is Hester not to come with us?" he said, taking a step into the room. He had her stick, as she saw, in his hand, and this was the walk she was to have taken to win it. It was four miles each way to Barley Hill from Wancote; it would have been seven from Lutteridge.

"Not to-day," said his aunt, pleasantly, in reply to the inquiry. "She will go another day. She will not mind taking care of me this once, will you, Hester? I have sent back the landau, for," turning to her nephew, "none of the girls care to give me their company in that, but they are very good in carting me about—into the ditch even, sometimes," added she, with a smiling allusion to an overturn which had taken place shortly before.

What could be said? Hester had been the one for whom the plan had been originated; it was Hetty's walk, and he was instantly conscious that he cared not to go at all if she were not to be with him.

Since it appeared that both the elder sisters were likewise going, he had not the slightest objection to a quiet-looking young clergyman being also of the party; but if, as it turned out, these three were to be accepted in lieu of his chosen companion, he was anything but obliged to them.

The whole aspect of the afternoon was now changed. He felt that he had been cheated—done. It had been so cleverly managed that he was actually powerless in the matter, and that was a feeling Colonel Lutteridge had very seldom in his life experienced. He knew not what to do: he could hardly rush after the others, seize one of them by the arm, and bring him or her back to be his aunt's charioteer; he could not well propose to Lady Manners to give up her drive; he could neither do nor say anything to alter the arrangement.

He looked at his cousin, bit his lip, and went quickly out.

"Really, Hester," said her mother as soon as the door was shut, "you are not particularly polite to me. What is there in giving up a walk, which you can take any other day you like, to make you look so sullen? It is not very pleasant for me to think that I have such an unwilling companion. I could not have believed, my dear, that you would have shown so disobliging a spirit. It is not often that I ask you to take me anywhere; and I am sure, since it is so great a sacrifice, I am not likely to do it soon again!"

No answer. Increase of gloom, if possible.

"I was quite mortified before them all," continued Lady Manners, with some asperity. "Such a little thing to be asked! Agatha or Jane would have come without a word."

"I did not say a word."

"You did what was worse: you showed it by your silence and your ill-temper. Jane drives me nearly every day, and you told her yourself that you would take her place whenever she wanted to ride."

"Mamma, she did not want to ride to-day."

"That is a mere quibble, Hester; she wanted to walk."

"Why did she not tell me before, then?"

"Before when?"

"Before I came down. They never said a word, but let me go and get ready, and come down thinking it was all right, and then, just at the last moment, I am told, when every one is by, that Jane is to go and I am not!" A great tear rolled down her cheek as she spoke.

"Hester, I could not have believed it of you! So childish! I am sorry for your disappointment, but," said Lady Manners, uneasily, and with an increased certainty that her prohibition had been a wise one, "you must not make such mountains out of mole-hills. I could not let Agatha go alone; you know Edward——"

"Oh yes, mamma; every one knows about Edward. But why should Jane go instead of me?"

"I thought it better, for several reasons. Jane has more tact—more thoughtfulness. As soon as I found Edward was going——"

"But why was Edward asked at all? Why could he and Jane and Agatha not have ridden together, or gone somewhere? Why need they have interfered at all with us—with Jem and me and—and Simon?"

It was an awkward question, involving more than the speaker had any idea of.

Nothing was further from the mother's wishes than to introduce into the mind of one so young and unsophisticated thoughts which must open her eyes, and destroy for ever that simplicity of ignorance which in early youth is so delightful. As long as she could she would keep the bloom upon her floweret; and even now, brought face to face with those tearful demanding eyes, she strove to evade the difficulty.

And again she had really nothing to say—nothing to take hold of. Could she have put her hesitation into words, it might have taken shape thus: "Your cousin looks on you as a pleasant child, but I fear you will not long be contented that he should do so;" but since she could not bring herself even to hint at such a possibility, she scarcely knew how to reply.

"Well, my dear," she said, after a long pause, during which there had been time for Hester to mark, and even to grow a little reluctantly inquisitive over her dubious countenance, "if I must say it, I did not particularly wish you to go, at any rate." She was, of course, prepared for the "Why not?" which followed, close as a clap of thunder on lightning just overhead.

"I think that your cousin—ahem—Simon

scarcely realises, seeing you so much younger than your sisters, and made a pet of by them" (inward protest on the part of her auditor), "that you are as old as you are. He has a habit of calling to you to go with him wherever he goes, and a brotherly way of expecting your company, and claiming it, which is all very nice, and I have nothing to say against it, poor dear fellow," said Lady Manners, beginning to flounder in deep waters—"only these little ways, Hetty, may be carried too far. Don't misunderstand me. I have no fault to find with either him or you. But I think—we all think, dear—that it is not for your dignity to be treated like a plaything. You must not mind my saying so. Who should tell you if your own mother should not? And I am not blaming you, love; I am only guarding you, shielding you from anything that might make you uncomfortable in after life to think of."

"Yes, mamma."

What did her mother mean—how much, how little?

Alas for the warning! It was the old story of shutting the stable-door when the steed was stolen. The woman outruns the man in such

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matters; and here it was the pupil who had stolen a march on her preceptor.

"Yes, mamma," said Hester in a low voice. "He is my cousin," she faltered the next minute. The argument he had himself used with Constance.

"He is! And of course your father and I wish him to be treated as a near relation in every way. We are particularly glad that all of you young ones like him so much, and that he takes so much notice of you. Being so *very much*"—emphatically—"older, we could scarcely have expected that he would. It might have been supposed he would have had his own friends. I own," with a little glow of gratified feeling, "that I do feel pleased; I do feel the compliment of his coming among us so much. I like Simon extremely. There is a straightforward plainness, a perfect simplicity about him, which can be the result of nothing but a superior mind; there is a repose in his manner which is only seen among the very best-bred people. For your brothers—for Bertie in particular—I could not desire a better companion; and, indeed, only yesterday I said to papa how glad I was to think we should have such an influence over him when he is at home, for really, in general he is so turbulent, so wilful, and so determined to have everything his own way, that sometimes I hardly know how to put up with him. He is always worst when his own friends are staying with us; but I am in hopes that he will be a little more particular as to whom he brings down, since he has such an opinion of his cousin."

"But about you, Hester," continued she, after a minute's reflection. "It is such a small matter, my child, and so easily put to rights, that I am almost sorry that anything has been said. I would not have spoken if you had not forced me to do so. It is merely a little way Simon has—a manner to you that I don't notice to any of the others."

"He has, he has!" cried aloud a voice in Hester's heart.

"Do you know what I mean, my love? I daresay you have not observed it; it is we older people who look on, who take heed of such things; we see the *beginnings*—the little feathers that show the way the wind blows. Cousins—even first cousins—must stop somewhere. I remember myself," proceeded Lady Manners, waxing eloquent, "how difficult it was for my sisters and me, when I was about your age; we had two cousins—Hugh, and another who died——"

"I know," said Hester. "Percival. Well, mamma?"

"They had grown up with us, and as we had only one brother, you know, your uncle Henry, Simon's father, these cousins were almost the same to us as brothers would have been. They spent all their holidays at the Manor; and when they came home from Harrow and from Oxford, we welcomed them just as if we had been all one family. It was not till they grew to be quite grown men, and we were girls of eighteen and nineteen, that they left off kissing us, just as brothers would!"

She could hardly bring herself to tell such a tale; and had she not been preoccupied with the recollection, would certainly have wondered at its effect on her auditor. All Hester's indignation and her wrongs were for the moment forgotten, and without the smallest sign of horror, she was listening with a smile upon her face.

"Did they do it often, mamma?"

"Oh, well, I don't know about often," said Lady Manners, testily. "Quite often enough. It was really a ridiculous state of things. Percival was twenty-three, Hugh was only a year younger, and we did not like it at all."

"Did you not, mamma?" "But I," thought Hester, "liked it very much."

"It was altogether unsuitable," proceeded the mother, with energy. "There we were, young men and women, no longer girls and boys, mingling together without any one to have the slightest restraint upon us. Your uncle Henry was years and years older; and, indeed, he was married, and had a house of his own, and these two sons, Simon and Robert, at the very time I speak of. My father thought he was doing his orphan nephews a kindness, since they had no home of their own to go to, in giving them the run of his; and so long as we were all children it was all very well; but then, when we began to grow older, he found out his mistake."

"Oh!" said Hester, with great interest. "Go on, mamma."

"Well," proceeded Lady Manners, entering into the spirit of a narrator, "it ended as these things always do end. Poor Percival! He would not believe that Anne did not care for him! He used to hang about her for years, always hoping against hope, and she really could not shake him off. She pitied him, and up to a certain point she liked him, but it never could have gone further on her part. He was not a man to have had any sway over her, and she was one who must always have looked up to a husband. The man she really would have married did not, as you may have heard, come forward till it was too late. I think you must know about him?"

"Yes—a little. But tell me all."

"He followed us to Italy, but she had begun to sink before he came. The end came on so rapidly that the doctors forbade the least excitement, and I fear even at the last the poor dear did not know all that he felt for her."

"Surely she might have been told then?"

"She might, and would. I would have taken it on myself to tell her, but we had no idea that the crisis was so near. We thought she might live through the winter at least, and then if she were very very carefully dealt with, and if her mind was kept perfectly quiet, hopes were still held out to us of her ultimate recovery. It is not for me to say," Lady Manners sighed; "we acted for the best; but I still believe that if she could have been allowed to see him—if he could have been permitted to watch over her and tend her—it would have done good, and not harm."

"Then there was Hugh, mamma?" Hester waited a due interval, and then started again in a lively voice. "I know what became of Percival, but what about Hugh?"

"Hugh," said her mother, with a faint tinge of colour in her cheek. "Oh, Hugh is alive, married, and prosperous."

"Ah, but—— Now, mamma," said Hester, laughing.

"But what, you mischievous little face?"

"Tell me about him; there's a good mother. I know there is something, but I never could make out what. Mamma, mamma, you cannot get out of it now! Was it he that—that you 'did not like it at all' in, you know?"

"Hester!"

"Well, but just say, mamma. Did it too 'end in the way it always does'? You said it always had the same end, didn't you?"

"I am afraid this had. But it is hardly

fair," proceeded Lady Manners, with undeniable enjoyment, "considering that he is alive, and that I am alive——"

"But you are both married and happy!"

"And it is an old story. Well, I suppose there is no harm in speaking of it now. Hugh was quite as bad as Percival, Hester; though matters were brought to an end more quickly. We were told it was impossible——"

"We were told!" cried Hester. "Oho, mamma! That sounds much better. I was afraid poor Hugh had been turned off as Percival was. It was 'we' this time, was it?"

"I was so young," pleaded her mother—"hardly older than you are now, Hetty; I had seen scarcely anything of the world. But still, I must say this for Hugh, that even if I had, I should have met with few to equal him! He was—he *is*, you know, exceedingly clever, and though not exactly good-looking, he had a resolute, expressive face, and a remarkable, fine, strongly-made, tall figure. Something like your cousin's—like Simon's. The same broad shoulders and erect carriage. The same kind of walk too. Simon reminds me frequently of Hugh, especially at a distance,—for their faces are not alike."

"Yes?" said Hester, with renewed zest. "Yes? Now go on, mamma, and don't stop! This is very interesting. I never heard a word of this before."

"You think it makes up for the lost walk?" said her mother, smiling, and secretly glad to have the matter so happily closed. "Well, you have not been a bad little body on the whole, so I suppose I must reward you. What do you want to know more?"

"Mamma, stop! Mamma, I have caught you. How came you to say that you could not shake them off? You did not *wish* to shake them off—to shake Hugh off, I mean?"

"Well, no, Hetty; but I was not thinking of myself just at the moment; I was thinking of Anne. No, I cannot say that I wished anything of the kind. I was well content to go on as we were, but Hugh was not, and that—in short, that was what led to an explanation," concluded she, lucidly.

"Do tell me about it," pleaded Hester. "How did he go on when the 'explanation' was near? What did he do *just before*? How did he look? Did he say anything to show it was coming?"

"You don't expect me to remember his looks as well as his words, Hetty." (She remembered them perfectly all the same.) "But I will try to recall what went on as well as I can, though I confess I feel something of a traitor."

"Oh no, mamma. Not to me!"

"It was in the summer—at least it was at the end of the summer—that things came to a point. My father had been away, and though he had left our old aunt in charge, she was a mere nonentity—a feeble, selfish woman, who neither knew, nor cared to know, what we were all doing. Throughout the long vacation these cousins had been almost entirely at Lutteridge, and we had had nothing but riding, boating, and picnicing from morning till night—Percival always with Anne, Hugh with me. Your uncle Henry did come down now and then to see us, and there were other people in the house, but as we behaved outwardly with all propriety, nobody interfered. I see now that such carelessness on their part was very wrong, very reprehensible, and certainly it ruined the happiness of one at least. Percival never got over his attachment."

"But about Hugh?"

"One summer evening—it was after a dance at one of the neighbours'——"

"Oh, mamma, tell me the whole truth; don't stop to consider how much or how little I am to hear! What dance?"

"At Earl's Court," said Lady Manners, reluctantly. "We had been dancing a great deal together, and before the night was over——"

"Where?" demanded her daughter. "Where?"

"Where? What do you mean, child?"

"Where did he do it? Where did he speak? Not in the ball-room, I hope? I hate ball-room engagements."

"So do I," cordially agreed her mother. "But, you see, this was hardly a ball, and certainly it was not a ball-room engagement, in the popular acceptation of the term. Hugh was the last person to care for balls, unless—well, unless we were there."

"You are so modest, mamma, you can hardly bring yourself to say 'I.'"

"It was 'I' nevertheless," replied Lady Manners, unable to deny the charge. "But it was not only at balls: wherever we went they had the prior claim to us, which, as we chose to allow it, was undisputed by others. I am afraid it was during the evening of the ball, however, Hetty, that he spoke."

"Where was it, mamma? In the garden? On the stairs?"

"How came you to guess? It was on the stairs. Then when my father came home he was sadly vexed."

"Was he? Because you were cousins?"

"No; I have reason to think that was not the cause, although grandpapa—I am afraid he was not quite truthful—did at first seek to make it out so. I think now that he must have imagined that it would be impossible for Hugh, without influence, to rise in his profession as he has done. He did not wish me to marry a poor man."

"Did you mind very much, mamma? Were you *dreadfully* sorry?"

"I think that at first I was 'dreadfully sorry,' Hester."

"Then you plucked up heart, and married papa!"

"Not for several years. I had never seen papa at the time Hugh was dismissed."

"Poor Hugh!"

"Poor Hugh was far enough away when I was married. He was ordered at once never to come near the house again, and we were not allowed even to hear about him as long as I was at home. Percival, whom my father knew he could trust, was forbidden to speak of him to us; of course, the least suspicion that Percival had any feelings of the same sort would have sent him into banishment likewise, but since he kept it for long afterwards to himself — indeed he never openly spoke at all, knowing that it would be useless—we, too, said nothing. We knew that Anne was unchangeable, and that, since she did not return his affection, there was no occasion to betray him. Grandpapa would not have troubled his head about either of them if the feeling had not been reciprocated by us."

After this, and throughout the drive which followed, Hester was as bright as a lark. It might almost have seemed as if the mental thunderstorm had cleared the sky, or at least as if all clouds had been lifted off it, since not another word was heard of rebellion or regrets.

She flourished her whip, laughed, chattered, and took the pony along at a pace which astonished her mother. Over the common, through the lanes, up the great Northern road, and back by the river-side they trotted fast and fearlessly; and having started so much later, they had not been long in the house again ere the walkers were heard in the porch.

CHAPTER XVI.

ROWING HOME.

> "At first a simple liking, and no more,
> He sits considering, 'Do I love, or not?'
> He seems the pleasing object to explore,
> As men appear to view a pleasing spot;
> Then forms a wish that Heaven would fix his lot
> In that same place; and then begins regret
> That 'tis not so. But may the prize be got?
> Then comes the anxious strife that prize to get,
> And then 'tis all he wants, and he must have it yet."
> —CRABBE.

"AFTER all, you did enjoy your drive, I suspect," said Lady Manners, as she lingered by the drawing-room fire, loth to leave it even for the one awaiting her up-stairs. "Say that you did, if you can, Hetty, or, at least, let the others see your bright face. It is quite gay now. I should be glad for them to know that you did not dislike being left to take care of your old mother quite so much as you thought you would."

"They shall see it," thought Hester. "He shall see it at least—Master Lutteridge shall! Wretch! To go off in that way! It was all very well for mamma to try and come between us—she does not understand; but he should not have given in so tamely. If he had been Hugh or Perceival he would have made a stir."

"Mamma and I had a delightful drive," she said, loud enough to attract attention, when all were gathered in the room, and there was a momentary silence and sinking into easy-chairs. "We have only come in half an hour ago, and did not expect you nearly so soon."

Now how was it that, without speaking to or even looking at her cousin, Miss Hester was aware of how the person for whom her little speech was intended, took it to a nicety.

She knew the moment when he entered the room, though her head was turned the other way—knew that he stood still at the door, and was almost certain that he had been coming up to her, but had been checked by the sound of her own blithe accents.

Accordingly she instituted a running fire of questions about the walk, plied Edward Searle with good things which he had no appetite for, and skipped from one to another, bent on effacing as completely as possible all recollections of the face which had haunted Simon throughout the afternoon.

He turned on his heel and walked to the fireplace.

The rest of the party were in excellent spirits, —even the young clergyman reviving under the good fortune of finding a vacant seat by Agatha's side. This was nothing new; he was an old adorer, and the family had long been accustomed to look on him as such. No result was ever expected to come of it; and since it was tolerably evident that the walk had not been so enjoyable to him as it had to the others, Lady Manners felt she could do no less than invite him to remain to dinner.

The hospitality being extended to both visitors, neither were able to accept it. Mr Searle had an appointment; but the regret he testified was so unfeigned, that it was soon discoverable he only needed to have the invitation altered to the following evening to restore him to equanimity. Colonel Lutteridge was more brief in his denial. He had promised, he said, with a shade of irony in his tone, not to be out at dinner without letting his sister-in-law know not to wait for him, and it would not be fair to break his word without special necessity for so doing.

Of course a messenger was proffered, but declined with thanks. He would prefer to stay another day, but not the next day. He expected a friend then at Lutteridge. He did not look at Hester nor come near her, and yet she felt that she could have kept him with a word. "It will end as it always does!" she said, gleefully to herself. "Mamma is right. He is angry with me now—angry because I am pleased. He had expected to see me sorry, as I was when he left, and when he never made an attempt to help me. I have not forgiven you yet, cousin. But since you are not going to stay, and since I fancy you have missed me a little—just a very very little—I think I will take over your tea to you and see what will come of it. I must have a chance of telling you how badly you behaved to me, at least. It won't do either of us much good to sulk in different quarters of the room."

"Who is that for, Hester?" said Agatha, seeing her sister, cup in hand, steering across the room, which, now all in shadow, was full of treacherous pitfalls and dim obstructions.

"Allow me," said Edward Searle, darting forward.

Their united exclamations made Colonel Lutteridge turn round; and as he took what she had brought for him, he looked inquiringly into the giver's face. Apparently he found in it something to bring him after her, for in a very few minutes he had followed to her corner, and sat down by her on the old settee.

"Bread and butter?" said Hester, as innocently imagining he had come for something to eat. "Or cake?"

"Thank you, no. Yes; give me some cake, to eat which I must remain by this tray. I wish they would talk over there. Don't get up, Hester; wait here till they do."

"Has everybody got what they want? I must attend to them all," responded the teamaker, looking assiduously about.

"Of course they have. You looked after every one of them before me. Now they are as silent as the grave, just because they have all got their cups and plates full. Ah! here is Sir John! He will set them agoing."

He rose to shake hands with his uncle, and sat down again. Sir John had been shooting, and was eager for a listener. He stood in front of the tea-table, charmed to find his nephew there, explaining about this shot and that shot, the nature of the ground, and the working of his dogs, till Simon, wellnigh worn out with saying, "Ah! Indeed! Very good! Excellent!" long after his attention had flagged, was ready to think he should, after all, have to depart without the few words he coveted from the silent girl at his side.

That she remained there—that she did not embrace the opportunity to slip away—was his only consolation.

Luck, however, was not altogether against him. It appeared that Sir John had not before seen the other guest of the day; and his attention being at length gently drawn to the fact by his daughter, he was instantly anxious to make up for his apparent neglect.

"Edward Searle?" he said. "*Here!* Where? In this room?" wheeling about and looking round him. "Why, Edward," striding up to the young man, "never saw you till this moment! Jane, give us a blaze. I thought you were Jem all this time! How long have you been here? And so I hear you are going to turn into a neighbour. What does your father say to it? He will want to manage your parish as well as his own, eh? Now where do you think I have been to-day?"

Preliminary civilities disposed of, he was burning to begin over again his narrative, and, with his gun between his knees, pulled a chair in front of his victim, and pinned him down to the spot.

The huge arm-chair thus wheeled round with its back to the tea corner, formed a regular rock of defence. His loud steady tones had scarcely got as far as "Now where do you think I have been to-day?" ere Simon had turned to his cousin; and while affecting to pass over her, and help himself afresh from the table, had taxed her with breach of faith to him.

"What have you to say, Hester? You threw me over remorselessly."

"Certainly. We throw over anybody if mamma requires us."

"Did she require it?"

"*Us*, I said—not *it*."

"You meant it. I understood tolerably well all that passed before we went out. I did not blame you, little chick, for looking like a thunder-cloud. I was rather glad that you did; but what was the meaning of those superabundant spirits as soon as we came in? You thought to cheat me, did you?"

"I thought you might have put in a word for me." Hester was still injured and unforgiving.

"*That* was it! O——h!" his brow cleared at once, "Now, I comprehend the whole. It seemed to me that your face had changed—that it was not toward me as it had been——"

"My face had nothing to do with it. Besides, you have no right to look at my face."

"Not even as a cat may look at a king? I had a very good look at it, however, my little termagant, and never did I see it half so fierce before. Yet I think, Hester—I think there were tears not far off. And you thought I might have put in a word for you! But what could I say? Tell me what I should have done. I am ready to be reproved—corrected. As for me, my walk was spoilt; but that was nothing. Show me how I could have amended my error——" He could have discussed the subject by the hour, but the ladies rose at the sound of the dressing-bell. Perforce his departure may be taken, and she could but feel that her hand was held long and pressed closely, ere he was gone.

It fell out that the next day was warm and balmy, as autumn days occasionally are, and a scheme of going on the river, originating with Bertie Manners, who had returned in the morning for a brief stay at home ere he quitted it for a season, was unanimously agreed to by Agatha, Jane, and Hester, who had fixed on nothing for the afternoon.

Perhaps some of them half expected the visitor who walked in ere they had separated to make ready. Colonel Lutteridge had been in Seeley with Sir John, and now looked up the boys, he said, to engage them to shoot with him on the next day. It was too late to go out that day, and though Sir John invited him to take a walk instead, he did not close with the proposal.

A row up the river suited him much better.

Sir John went up to his wife, who was suffering from cold—she had caught cold during the long drive of the day before—and the young ones hurried off merrily down the slopes.

Jem was already at the boat-house, preparing to go out on his own account. It needed only to exchange the skiff he had just brought out for a good-sized broad-bottomed tub, and he was delighted to make one of the crew. The three girls sat together in the stern, while their brothers rowed, and their cousin smoked in the bow, with Jem's retriever at his feet. Several other boats were passed—it appeared they were not the only people who had been tempted by the beauty of the afternoon—and congratulations on it, and on their cleverness in having made such an excellent use of it, passed between one and another.

They rowed up about four miles, and halted for the business of the inevitable pipe. "What do you want to smoke for?" was protested in feminine accents to no purpose. Rest they must—even Agatha would allow that: well then, why not smoke? She was not required to stay and partake of the refreshment. She and the other two girls might land and take a walk, and return in half an hour. There were plenty of pretty walks about, and they had spoken of gathering ferns.

It was a good arrangement, or at least the boys thought so; and no further objection being offered, the sisters rambled about for the time given, and returned punctually at its close. Of course they were kept waiting; Bertie had objections to urge — delays wherewith to tease Agatha.

At length, however, and in what was really very good time, they pulled alongside grumbling, the elder sisters were handed in, and the boat was gently pushed back a few paces.

"Hester is going to sit with me in the bow," said Simon, who had jumped ashore to superintend the embarkation.

Agatha protested. How could he think of such a thing? It would be very unsafe. There was not room — never had been considered to be room for more than one in the bow. There was more than room by her and Jane.

"Plenty of room here," said Simon, taking Hester's hand. "Now, Hetty, steady! Don't move till I tell you." She was silent—unwilling to take either part; taken by surprise too. He had not said a word of such an arrangement to her.

"Bertie," cried his eldest sister, "you know how easily these boats are upset. Don't you think it would be very unsafe?"

"Oh, unsafe!" Bertie laughed in derision. "You girls think everything is unsafe. One seat is as good as another."

"You know how particular papa is."

"I know about boats as well as papa, and so does Simon."

"Such nonsense in Hester!" muttered Agatha in Jane's ear. "I suppose she asked him to take her. She really ought not to do these things; she ought to be more careful. Mamma said she had given her a hint too. Oh!" with a little cry of alarm, as the boat certainly did turn slightly over when pressed by her sister's foot.

"All right, Agatha," said Jem, kindly. "It was only that she did not step into the middle. Do remember to step into the middle, Hester, *always*."

"I know it is not safe," said Agatha, with some real and much apparent anxiety. "How can there be room for two people on that little bit of a seat? And look how near the water's edge they are!"

"Fudge!" said Jem. "Here, Dash," to the dog, "you come here, sir, and lie down—down. There, you see, he'll lie like a log. Now you're all right, Agatha," as with a headlong plunge Dash rolled to the bottom and curled up there. "He'll keep the balance," added Jem. "He'll weigh as much as any of you, I daresay."

"Such nonsense in Hester!" muttered Agatha again. Then she called aloud to her sister. "I do wish you would not lean over the side in that way, Hester. It makes me quite frightened to see you. I know you will be in the water before any of us can see—it is getting so dark."

"All right, Agatha." This time it was the Colonel's deep voice which spoke from the bow. "Don't you be afraid. I'll put my arm round the little one and hold her fast."

In the silence which followed his conciliatory overture he saw nothing. He did as he promised, drawing her close to him, while the deepening twilight of the November afternoon gradually fell on all around. Then they began to talk. "Look at that poplar, Hester. What a giant fellow he is! Look at his long shadow stretching right across the river. I like poplars; do you?"

"I like them," said she, "because they give me the idea of sentinels left to die, each at his post, deserted by all around, yet true to themselves and their duty."

"What do you know about sentinels, child?"

"I know—I have read."

"And I have seen; but I should never have thought of that. Hester, whenever I speak to you I wonder where you have learned so much. I seem to have gone through the world blindfold."

"Don't laugh at me."

"I am not laughing; I am not in the mood for laughing. How much I have lost in my life; how little I have gained! When I look back and think of the years I have wasted, the opportunities I have thrown away, the good I might have done, and the happiness I might have had, if——" He stopped abruptly.

"If what?"

"If I had lived here and known you."

"But," said Hester, puzzled, "surely it is better to have been of some use in the world—to have done something for your queen and country, given up for them, fought for them—oh, I think a soldier's life must be the grandest there can be! I would not live at home and do nothing, if I could go and fight, and work, and make a name—feel one's self of use in the world, and—and——"

He smiled. The old dull routine, the petty chatter, the aimless round, rose before him ; and yet it seemed a shame, even if he could have done so, to open the eyes of the enthusiastic maiden.

"That is your idea of a soldier's life," he said. "Battles, and glory, and epaulets ?"

"No, of course not—of course not. What nonsense you talk ! I know you have long marches to take, and that you are often at a station for months together, away from all your friends and relations, and that you have hospitals to look after, and children's schools, and other things——"

"Upon my word you know a great deal."

"You mean that I know nothing at all. But I don't care. I say it *is* a fine life. You are only making a fuss, as Bertie does, and as they all do, to try and get pitied."

"Perhaps I was, Hester ; and you don't intend to pity me. You think I should have stayed where I was, and not have come home to interfere with my nephew's prospects, and take the reins of government out of the hands of Constance, eh ?"

He was looking at her keenly, but she did not wince. "No," said she, promptly. "I think nothing of the kind. I think you have been away quite long enough ; but I don't think you have thrown away your life by having given up some part of it for the good of others."

"The question is," said Simon, "whether it was for their good. But never mind," clearing his brow ; "you can't help me to decide that point. I shall do my best among my own people for the rest of my days, and hope for more apparently good results. I am come to settle down at last, Hester ; how do you like the idea, the prospect of having me always about ? Am I a bore to you all ? Do I come over too often ? Shall you feel it a relief when I am away now and then ?"

Something in the hesitation of her laugh was answer enough ; he was satisfied to have no other. "How quiet it is !" he resumed, presently. "What a still, solemn landscape, and how easily the oars dip in and out, without a sound ! We are going with the stream now, I suppose, but one could not tell it ; there is no current visible anywhere. The banks seem as if they fell behind us, rather than as if we glided past them. Are you enjoying yourself, little one?"

"Very much—*very* much."

"*Very* much! What a vehement little soul it is! What a number of things you like '*very* much,' Hester. I wonder, now, if you extend the feeling towards people—whether you like—well, me—*very* much? You won't tell me that, I suppose? However, say, do you prefer your seat here to the one you had coming? Do you like being with me in the bow, or would you rather be down at the other end with your sisters?"

"Oh, here—here, of course."

"Why here?"

"I can see much better. I can look into the water. It is nicer every way. Here, it is delightful; down there it was—stupid."

After this nothing was said for some time. Then a remark she made on the flight of a bird passing, drew his head again down to hers; he appeared to have been thinking, for, instead of answering, he said softly, "Do you like me, Hester?"

She made a petulant movement.

"Don't be cross," said he; "I did not mean to vex you. Give me your hand. Here, under the plaid. How warm the little fingers are! No—don't snatch it away; as long as you leave it there I will ask you no more questions; I will reserve them for——" He stopped, wondering in his own mind if she had any suspicion what he meant.

Oh, why was he so old, or why was she so young? He would have given half he possessed to sweep away the twenty years between them, to make sure that she understood what she was doing—felt all that the moment meant. He half hoped she did, and yet he durst not risk it without further evidence—something more to go upon.

"You are not angry with me, Hester?"

"No."

"Nor put out, nor annoyed?"

"N—no."

"Why are you looking down so pertinaciously into the water?"

No answer.

"Is it to avoid looking at me?"

No answer.

"Hester, if I thought you were not happy I would not keep you here a moment longer! Listen. They are talking of landing to walk home. Shall I give my vote for it, or against it? Shall we get out, or shall we stick by the boat? You shall say; I will be guided entirely by you. Shall we go, eh?"

"No."

"It is so much nearer," said Agatha's voice in the distance. "We are barely a mile from home at this point, if we go across the meadows; and the river takes such a curve, that we are at least two by water."

"What does it signify? It is down stream," said Jem.

"Just as you like," said Bertie.

"I really think we had better. It is getting dark so fast, I think mamma will be growing nervous."

"It is lighter on the water than on the land; but do as you please," said her eldest brother, who, for a wonder, did not raise his voice in dissent; the truth being that he had no objection to having the boat lightened, and had the proposal come from any one but Agatha, he would have seconded it heartily. But the chronic feud between the two did not admit of any armistice. He could not bring himself to do more than leave her to work the matter herself, unsupported by him.

She appealed to Jane. Jane agreed; and that not solely because Agatha bid her. She had quietly watched the two in the bow, and thought, as her mother had done, that matters were being carried too far. She was not personally interested—had not Agatha's feelings on the subject; but she had a sense of what was right and fitting, which was now roused to indignation. She thought her sister ought not to be treated so; she did not like to see Hester so engrossed by their cousin—so ready to do whatever he told her—so entirely mastered by him in whatever he proposed. Neither of them were behaving well; and as, in common with all the rest, she had no conception of anything on Simon's part beyond the merest fatherly, friendly, cousinly liking, she thought he ought to know better than to manifest it in such a fashion.

She was now quite of Agatha's opinion as to the expediency of quitting the boat; but their united voices could not prevail.

Simon declared the expedition would be a failure if cut short at this point. The meadows were dripping, a white steam was spreading all over them even now, and would be worse every moment, and, moreover, he would be landed on the wrong side for Lutteridge. Surely Agatha would not be so cruel, so barbarous, as to land him four miles from home at that hour?

Certainly not? But why should he not go on in the boat?

Were they then to be without attendants? He would not hear of that; if they went, he would go. He would certainly see them safe home.

She protested in vain, and a dispute seemed imminent.

"What on earth is it all about?" said Bertie at last. "Pull on, Jem."

"I am sure you will both be tired," murmured Agatha, desperate.

"They are hardly rowing at all, you see, Agatha," answered her cousin, willing to pacify; "they can almost rest on their oars and let the boat float. Though there is no current to be seen, it must be stronger than we think."

"You do not take an oar yourself, however," said she, feigning raillery.

"I will, if either of them are tired. Tired, Jem? Shall I take yours, Bertie?"

Of course they were not. What did he mean? A paddle like this tire them! The girls could pull as far.

After that suggestion they would have died sooner than have yielded their oars, and nothing but the regular dip of these and an occasional low murmur at the upper end of the boat broke the silence all the way home. The elder sisters were too much annoyed, too indignant, to care for conversation; each was brooding over her own thoughts, and the boatmen, from different reasons equally silent, drew their long strokes in placid enjoyment of the scene.

"Well, a row like this is really rather nice," said Bertie, as at length, having landed their cousin on his side of the river, they pulled ashore, left the boat, and resumed their jackets. "Holloa! Whoo—oop! Good night!" in answer to the "Good night" which came down to them from the heights on the other side. "Has he got no further than that?" added he to Jem.

It would have astonished them both somewhat if they had followed, and, unperceived, had seen him stand still, and at length turn, deliberately retrace his steps, and walk slowly along the river-path away from his destination. He could not yet face Constance; he wanted to be by himself to think.

Could he make her happy? Was he to believe that one so young and fair and sweet could be content to pass her life with him? If not, it must come to an end this delicious dream; he durst not venture on such another afternoon—it was too bewildering, intoxicating. He was sure now of what he wanted. It was no longer to keep one thrilling voice by his ear, to tame a wilful child, to gratify a moderate measured affection—he must have her for his own.

Now how about his chances, seeing it was all or nothing? Up to this time he thought,—he was a modest man, but still he thought he could be sure that she loved him as much as, so far, he had loved her. She had allowed that she was satisfied in his presence, with his arm around her and her hand in his. She had never rebuffed him, never pained him, never slipped out of his way. All as yet had gone well, but the step he presently desired to take was of such a nature that if he did not gain what he sought, he must lose all that he actually possessed. It was a terrible leap in the dark; but be the result what it might, he felt that he had no choice but to take it.

His own sensations, the throbbings of his pulses, the phrases which formed themselves in his innermost heart,—all these were so many tell-tales of what was hidden there. The moment that the truth dawned upon him, the moment he knew, beyond the possibility of doubt, that he loved his cousin—that moment he decided to ask her to be his wife. But, alas! he should have done so before.

PART V.

CHAPTER XVII.

"IT WAS FOR HESTER'S OWN SAKE I DID IT."

> "Better a little chiding than a great deal of heartbreak."
> —*Merry Wives of Windsor.*

SOLITUDE would have been no less welcome to Hester than to Simon, but since she could not expect any such luxury she made the best of matters as they were. With a jaunty step she accompanied her sisters up to the house, and her air of complacency and inward satisfaction, her utter disregard of the impending reproaches, was the last drop in the cup of their exasperation. Agatha was dangerous—in a white heat—resolved on strong measures; Jane even was urged to language which she seldom made use of; but Hester laughed at them both.

What had they to complain of? What was the matter? Was it because they had not got out at the point? gone home across the marshes?

—they were marshes, not meadows, at this time of year—was that why they were both so cross and disagreeable? She would go back to the boys, since she was to be found fault with for their misdemeanours.

"You had better have gone home with Simon," sneered Agatha.

"So I had, much better for all the pleasure your company and Jane's is likely to prove. Simon was a great deal more agreeable."

"Really, Hester, I was ashamed of you," said Jane, seriously. "You ought to have come and sat with us—with Agatha and me—as we told you. You had no business up at that end of the boat at all. And—altogether, it was not nice."

"Do you mean to say that I may not sit at one end of the boat with my own cousin, whom we see every day, because the rest of you are at the other? You will say next that I ought not to sit in the same boat with him! I never heard such a thing in my life!"

"You know very well that it was not merely sitting at his end of the boat."

"That was what you said!"

"You must have settled it beforehand," put in Agatha.

"I never heard a word till he said it out before you all."

"Then why did you not stop it? You could have said immediately that you would prefer sitting with us."

"I should have told a lie if I had."

"Hester!" remonstrated Jane.

"How can you talk so?" reproved Agatha. "Such a word to use! I never feel sure what things you will say. I do not wonder at mamma not liking you to be alone with Simon. You will not take a word from anybody——"

"I don't know what all this is about," cried Hester, at last. "I wish you would let me manage my own affairs. Scolding away—both of you—with nothing in the world to scold about! If any one was to blame, it was Simon—why don't you preach to him? I never said a word; I never took any part in anything; and yet you blaze up like two furies, and turn all your wrath upon me! You could smile upon him to the last, but the moment his back is turned you begin to rail at us both! I suppose the whole storm is because he asked me instead of one of you to be his companion; *that* is the only thing I can think of; and it is very hard that I should have to bear the brunt if he displeases you." This was a dexterous feint to throw off and silence the enemy, now that the near proximity of the house began to cast its shadow over the three. Still the little maid was in too high a state of exaltation and bliss to be troubled with any deep forebodings. It must end now, must end soon, she hoped, she felt a firm conviction, "as such things always do end."

Poor Lady Manners! Could she have known the effect her admirable lesson had had in reality! Could she have suspected how it was at this time steeling her daughter's courage to face the future, she would almost have shed tears over her, deluded as she believed the child to be.

"Hester! Hester!" came the boys' voices from behind, as their quicker steps made them gain on those in front.

"Well?" said Hester, turning gladly back. But the next moment her heart, which had been beating evenly enough before, began to patter loud and fast as she beheld their faces brimming over with ominous mirth.

"I say, you had a jolly time, hadn't you?" cried Bertie. "By Jove! I had no idea Simon had been such an old flirt!"

"I tell you what, Hetty, you don't catch me going out to make No. 3 at any of your promenades again, I can tell you! I have no fancy for playing gooseberry," subjoined Jem.

"Be quiet." Hester frowned to enforce her imperative whisper. "Bertie, Jem, do take care. Don't go on before them!" looking after her sisters. "I don't mind your laughing when there is no one by," she went on, bent on pacification, "but please, please don't say anything —you have no idea——"

"Oh, that's it, is it? Oh!" said Bertie, intelligently. "I saw Agatha was savage. She did not approve of being passed over?"

"They wanted to walk, you know," evasively. "And Agatha always does like to get her own way."

"That she does!"

"I thought it had been something to do with Simon," said Jem.

"Well," said Hester, hesitating, "she is put out with him too."

"Eh?" said Bertie, suspiciously. "Holloa! I believe you know more than you want to say. Well, I'm not the one to spoil sport, and upon my word it was fun to see Agatha's face. I studiously rowed as slowly as ever I could to prolong the agony. She was always pretending she was cold, and it was dark, and everything she could think of to hurry us on. But I saw through her! You ought to thank me, Het; you owe me a debt of gratitude. If it had not been for me you would have been put alongside an hour ago."

"Much obliged, I'm sure." But the gay retort sank away to a whisper, and her face fell the next moment, at a summons to her mother's room. She knew what that meant. There would be no question now of putting down the attack with a high hand, as in the first instance she had done; nor yet of turning it aside with easy pleasantry, as in the second; and the only defence—the one, true, real, honest defence which alone could justify all—must never be spoken. But it was hard that it should not be understood without words: she felt that both he and she might have been trusted; that it needed not to have been thought so altogether out of the bounds of possibility that he should love her, and desire to make her his own. Certainly, were she not to believe this she would have nothing to say—nothing. But then, you see she did believe it, only, unfortunately, she could not say so, could not have said it had she even been given the chance. That, however, at least, she would be spared; she guessed what would be said, how she would be rebuked and admonished in general terms, how her mother, herself loathing the task, would slur it over quickly and have done with it, scarcely liking to hint at what she so strongly disliked, and thankful when her duty had been done.

It would be disagreeable, but Hester thought she could bear it. With Simon's words still ringing in her ears, with his clasp still warm upon her hand, she was lifted above much.

But she had to go through more than she had bargained for. Feeling that she had been too reticent before, Lady Manners was resolved to be explicit now. If it had been by Agatha only that the evil report had been brought—Agatha being known to exaggerate, and be occasionally prejudiced—it might have been taken in a modified form; but Jane was to be trusted. Jane was never unjust—was never known to make mischief.

And now here was even the indulgent, forbearing peacemaker of the family up in arms, to the full as indignant as her sister! Feeling all the weight of such an ally, Agatha, with the wisdom of the serpent, stood back and let Jane speak.

A few words explained all, and by the time the trio behind reached the front-door, Lady Manners' maid was waiting to intercept them.

"Whew!" said Jem, with a comical look. "Poor Het!"

"Brazen it out, I would!" whispered Bertie. "Don't let Agatha have it all her own way. She is not to twist mamma round her finger. Stick up to them well, Hetty!" nodding to her as she went up-stairs.

But no Agatha was there to be stuck up to. Not a word could Lady Manners have spoken had such an auditor been present: so soon as she had heard the accusation she had dismissed the accusers, and she now sat alone and terrible, loathing, as we have said, the task her conscience would not let her shrink from. Her very repugnance wrought her up to increased severity. Her daughter—the one she loved the best—ought to share the pain she felt—ought to learn a woman's lesson.

And that lesson was, it must be confessed, enforced with unsparing tongue. Not with raised voice, not with gross epithets—oh dear, no; but words were spoken, hopes were dashed to the ground, a heart was crushed, and the life well-nigh wrung out of it, all in one short half hour.

Jem, hanging about the stairs, like Moses' sister of old, to see how it fared with her, was scared by the apparition of Hester's face when at length she emerged from the interview. He seized her, and would have questioned and consoled, but she wrenched herself from his grasp and hurried past. What if she should meet any of the others, with such eyes and such a face? Not even Jem, her dear, kind, understanding brother, could keep her from that haven of refuge she sought, and up she flew to reach it.

"And I think I shall not have to speak to her again," reflected the parent, calming down into judicious complacency. "I had to be exceedingly serious. Such a thing was never heard of! I am astonished at Simon. I thought, considering all I told Hester yesterday, that she herself would have been more careful; but it seems not to have had the slightest effect. I shall take very good care that nothing of this sort ever happens again. Come in."

It was Jem who had tapped at the door, and who now entered, untidy and unready as usual, with a wistful smile upon his face. "You have had it out with Hester, mamma; I met her running up-stairs just now, with all the starch taken out of her. Have you been down upon her awfully?"

"I don't know what you call being 'down upon her,'" said his mother, shortly. "I had to speak to Hester very severely—very severely indeed. I never had to speak to any child of mine about such conduct before, and I hope I shall never have to do so again. The idea of such a thing!"

"I am afraid you have been awfully down upon her."

"My dear, what would you have? Am I to allow one sister to behave, as I never have, and never will permit the others to do? It was for Hester's own sake I did it. I am sorry that you and Bertie should have known anything of the matter; but since you were both present, and saw it all, you ought to know how very much I consider her in fault."

"It was not her so much as he."

"Very true; but I cannot speak to him. Although, Jem, I intend to *show* him pretty plainly that there is to be no repetition of such doings. At the same time, you must know that no young woman can be taken liberties with, except with her own free will."

"Liberties!" said Jem, deprecatingly. "You know, mamma, he thought it was only Hester."

"It has been 'only Hester' too long. We passed it over as long as we could;—his being so much older, and our own near relation, I thought it best to take no notice, hoping it might pass off without any disagreeable feeling arising between us. It is awkward having anything of that kind—would be more than awkward in this case. We wish to be as kind as possible to Simon, but if he abuses our confidence——"

"That's a shame. He is as good a fellow as ever lived!"

"You ought not to speak to me in that way, Jem. You ought not to say it is 'a shame.' No one can think more highly of your cousin than I do—than I have done up to the present time; but he has, I must own, disappointed me—hurt me very much in this matter. I could not have believed he would have treated one of my daughters so!"

"Mamma, you speak as if——"

"As if what?"

"As if," said her son, with an embarrassed laugh—"as if it were something awfully bad. You are making far too much of it. What did he do after all?"

"If you choose to take it in that way, my dear, of course I can say nothing." Lady Manners drew herself up, and her eyes sparkled.

"Of course," she continued, "if you and Bertie choose to encourage your sister, and tell her it was nothing after all, I may as well hold my peace. She will attend to you more than to me, I daresay! I might as well have spared myself the pain of speaking to her on the subject, if she is to be taught that I am only a foolish, ignorant person, who knows nothing about the matter!"

"Mamma, I only meant to say, that when you talked about 'treating one of your daughters so,' any one would have supposed he had done a great deal more than merely put his arm round Hester to keep her from falling out of the boat."

"Was there the slightest danger of her falling out?"

"Agatha thought there was."

"Agatha told me she was never more shocked in her life."

"I daresay," said Jem, angrily. "She always goes and tells. What business had she to come to you making mischief?"

"You would have preferred that I should not know, I can believe." This was a point on which Lady Manners was vulnerable.

"Let Hetty tell herself. Or Jane. Why need Agatha always be the one to fly and report everything?"

"Jane told me more than Agatha did. Jane was the one who said the most: it must have been bad indeed for Jane to think so much of it."

"It was just what I told you."

"You have not told me anything."

"He took her to sit with him in the bow, and Agatha called out that it was not safe, and that she was sure Hester would fall overboard, and a lot of that sort. Then Simon said he would put his arm round her to hold her safe. He only said it to satisfy Agatha; he never would have done it but for her. Upon my honour, mamma, that is the whole story."

"But," said Lady Manners after a pause, during which she had time to reflect that the story in these new hands did undergo a wonderful collapse, "they sat thus all the way home, and refused to get out when the others wished to do so."

"Nobody did wish it but Agatha. Agatha wanted to get out and land at the willow fence behind the long island. They would have had to walk all across those long marshy meadows, and through the woods, home by themselves—for we must have taken on the boat—and, of course, we would not have let Simon go with them, to have all that round afterwards! It would have been the stupidest thing to do! Agatha no more wanted it than—than anybody; she only did it to plague us all. Jane only agreed because she always says 'yes' to everything. I thought it quite rude the way Agatha went on. Simon hardly said a word either way."

"And Hester?"

"Hester never opened her lips."

"But Agatha said she was quite wild and flighty, making game of it all afterwards."

"Because she saw no harm in it, don't you see, mamma? I do wish you had not been down upon her so—so awfully."

She began to wish it a little herself. She bethought her of sundry expressions which had escaped in the heat of the moment, and would have recalled them if she could. She had been worked up to speak in the excitement of the first shock by the united representations of the two on whom she relied, and justly, for discretion; their joint account had been such as to admit of no delay in arraigning the culprit.

Well, she hoped it had been for the best, and it was some comfort to think that no more was likely to be required. But to Jem's repeated aspiration she returned no answer, and it by no means irritated her as at first. He was a constant mediator; she well knew his tap at the door after a conference, and his blundering attempts, which were certain, in the primary instance, to draw down the vials of wrath on his own head,—but in the long run she rarely failed to be softened by his influence.

"Well," she said, after a pause, "I am glad there is anything you can say, my dear, to extenuate the fault; but I really cannot see that, considering what I understood at first, I could have spoken to Hester otherwise than I have done. I am sure if you knew what it cost me to have to speak on such a subject at all——"

"Well, but mamma, don't let Agatha and Jane crow over her."

"You are not just to your sisters, Jem. They would not do such a thing. It was their bounden duty to let me know what went on to-day, considering that I was not there to see for myself. How am I ever to trust Hester out of my sight, if I have no confidence in her discretion? I would not have her stay at Lutteridge now for the world!"

"Not with Constance?"

"Constance is the last person I would trust her with," avowed Lady Manners, in the ardour of the moment. "I know Constance too well; and had I entertained the least suspicion of Simon's taking such notice of Hester, when she was at the Manor lately, nothing would have induced me to let her go. But I thought he was the last man in the world—I never thought he talked to girls at all."

"He always talks to Hester, mamma; he's fond of her, of course. But there was surely no harm in his sitting with her and talking to her to-day,—nothing to go and make a story about——"

"There was *something?*"

"They are great friends, you know."

"I understand. Well, Constance may ask

many times before Hester goes to stay with her again!"

"Perhaps she won't ask."

"Not ask?"

"I don't believe Constance cares for Simon's being here so often."

"Perhaps not. But I should not imagine," said Lady Manners, loftily, "that he will concern himself much as to that. It is natural that he should like to come, and will not regard absurd suspicions. We shall make no change towards him; there will be no decrease of friendly welcome because of what happened to-day, and what I am willing to believe was through mere thoughtlessness on his part. But one thing I am resolved on — where he goes, Hester shall not go; what he does, she shall not join in."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"I NEVER WANT TO SEE HIS FACE AGAIN."

> "To look a sorrow in the face,
> False magnitude imparts;
> All sorrows look immensely large
> Unto our little hearts."
> —Faber.

For all that had come and gone, Hester was obliged to go down to dinner as though there had been nothing; and it may be presumed that her spiritless manner and pale tear-stained face caused some surprise to Edward Searle, who, shy as he always was in the presence of Agatha, usually found relief in the lively chatter of her youngest sister. He found her no help to him now; his sallies were unresponded to; and at length it became obvious, even to his preoccupied observation, that something was the matter. Sympathising, and yet unable to do more, all the attention he could proffer was a large fire-screen, which, having wheeled up to Hester's chair, he insisted on placing before her. The act, she could not tell why, annoyed Lady Manners. She was still displeased with her daughter—still regarded her as under the ban; and felt that, until her own hand had been extended in forgiveness, it was not for Edward Searle, nor for any one else, to soften the sentence. Satisfactory as it was in one way to perceive its effects, she experienced, moreover, some irritation that these should be visible to other eyes than her own: could she have said what she wished, she would have dictated an inward martyrdom, combined with outward serenity.

"Do let Hester alone," she said to Jem, as she observed him in his own clumsy fashion endeavouring to "make it up" to his sister. "It is right that she should suffer, and it will not do any good to draw attention to her. I can see that Edward"—he had been "Edward" to them from early years—"notices already that there is something amiss. I do wish Hester could learn to control her feelings."

"Why should she go to bed?" further demanded she of Jane, who, now melted to pity, offered the gentle suggestion. "Why should she need you, or any one else, to come and ask me? Late? It is not late at all. It is barely half-past nine. Let Hester speak to me herself if she wants to go; it is absurd for her to keep away from us all in that marked manner, making herself conspicuous: she ought to know better than to let every one into her feelings as a child would."

"Mamma," said Bertie, scarcely taking the precaution of lowering his voice, "what is the matter with Hetty? Have you been pitching into her about Simon? She looks like a half-drowned robin, with her feathers all the wrong way!"

"She is very foolish to look anything of the kind."

"Oh, the poor little soul! So that's it? I'll engage she'll be a good girl from henceforth, and behave, as nurse used to say."

"I sincerely hope she will."

"Simon is the last fellow I should have dreamed of a girl's going on with."

His mother winced.

"It was the richest joke," continued he; "if it had been any one else—— Eh? What?"

"Do take care, my dear; I would not have you overheard for the world. It was," said Lady Manners, equal to the occasion, "a mere error in prudence, which any one of her age, barely out of the schoolroom, might make once in a way, without thinking. Of course," emphatically, "now that it has been put before her, she is vexed with herself, and very properly so: she will never be so thoughtless again. Hester, my love, bring your little chair here—that one; I have slipped a stitch, and no one but my own little knitting-woman can pick it up for me."

Bertie had involuntarily accomplished that which Jem and Jane had alike failed to bring about; but it may be doubted whether he had as much interest as they had in watching the hand which now lay on the brown head, bent over the task thus timely furnished. Bertie seldom looked into anybody's affairs, unless they were absolutely forced upon his notice; unless some suggestion or deprivation in the months that followed reminded him of that afternoon, it never recurred to his memory. For the moment, however, he was indubitably on Hester's side; Agatha was the only one of the family circle who was not altogether pleased to see the little chair by the side of the big chair once more.

She thought that her sister had been forgiven too soon—had been too early in the day restored to favour. She recollected the cheery welcome which had greeted them on their return from walking the afternoon before, and felt that, as the admonition which had been delivered then had been of none effect, even the present more stringent one was likely to pass off without better results. She sang, and played for Mr Searle to sing, and talked to him between whiles with her accustomed grace and dignity, but she did not approach the other end of the room.

"Hester used to sing that with us," said Edward, holding up an old favourite. "Shall we have it?"

"I think Hester has a headache," replied Miss Manners, feeling sufficiently convinced of the truth of her statement to have no hesitation in making it—since violent weeping is the surest recipe for headache known. "However, I will ask her. Hester, Edward wishes to have 'Night;' can you come and take your part?"

"She is being useful to me just now," interposed their mother's voice; "leave 'Night' for another evening, Agatha, and let us have your and Jane's pretty new duet—*my* one, you know."

"Mamma, we have sung it already!" Nothing but extreme annoyance could have betrayed a young lady of such excellent breeding into the *brusquerie.* Agatha rose from the piano, and would sing no more.

"Oh, don't go!" implored her companion. "Let me look over the portfolios, and see what new things you have got. I don't wonder at Lady Manners asking to have that duet again; it was lovely, and I could listen to it half-a-dozen times in an evening."

"Of course, if they will talk, mamma cannot hear what we are singing when the piano is at such a distance from her," explained the artiste, recovering. A slight to her music was what tried Agatha's temper more than anything, but the compliment, and the tact which supplied it, were equally soothing. "Mamma says she never can enjoy music when anything else is going on," added she, anxious to make the best of it. Edward Searle really was musical; Agatha loved to be thought so; he liked Agatha, and understood her; accordingly her attempts were tolerated because of herself, and he was smiled on because of his toleration. "Does your cousin sing?" he inquired, presently.

"Our cousin Simon?"

"Simon? Colonel Lutteridge, I mean. Is he Simon?"

"Yes."

"Is he musical?"

"Oh dear, no. He does not know one note from another."

"Ah! Curious! One can hardly believe in such a deprivation. But I suppose such semi-complete people are themselves really unaware of the extent of their loss."

"I suppose so. People have different gifts, you know."

"What does your cousin do? How does he employ himself?"

"Oh, he finds plenty of things to look after. He is not an idle man."

"Is he going into Parliament?"

"Not that I know of. Papa thought he would, at first; but he does not seem to care about it himself; and then, you see, there is no opening. It would never do for him to represent any county but this."

"I suppose he manages his estate himself?"

"Ye—es. At least he will, presently. Only, having been in India all his life, he cannot be expected to know much about it as yet. Mr Lewis is really a first-rate person—even papa allows that; and he has looked after Lutteridge ever since Simon inherited it—ever since Simon was a mere boy, in short."

"Then what has your cousin left for him to do?"

"I really do not know," said Agatha, laughing. "He will attend county meetings, and quarter-sessions."

"County meetings once a month, and quarter-sessions once a quarter!"

"He shoots."

"The shooting will soon be over."

"Well, Edward, you must ask him himself."

"What I want to know is," said Edward, coming to the point at last, "whether he has anything in the world to amuse him but coming over to Wancote?"

"Oh, that," said Agatha, demurely; "I am sure I cannot tell you. All I can say is, there is very little going on here to amuse him or any one."

"He was here both to-day and yesterday."

"And probably will be here to-morrow and the day after."

"Do you mean that, Agatha?"

"I do indeed. Very few days pass that he does not look in at some time or other. When the boys are gone, of course we shall not see him so often; but if they are not shooting together, they are arranging about shooting, and as the two grounds march, they generally end here."

"Never there?"

"The house is much further off; Lutteridge is a good deal further away from the river than we are—from the boat-house at least."

"I, however, shall have but little time for morning calls," interposed he; "I shall have other things to do than shooting, and making arrangements for shooting. If you do not see me except at long intervals, you will know that it is my work, not my will, that hinders me. My time will be more fully taken up than Colonel Lutteridge's this winter, I suspect," he observed, moodily.

"Of course we shall understand that. But still we shall meet you in the evenings now and then, I daresay. And we must have those musical afternoons we talked about. We have spoken about them to Gertrude Parker already, and we have wanted a good tenor for so long that we shall depend upon you whenever we fix anything."

And with this she rose and closed the piano resolutely. At his first entreaty she had resumed her seat on the stool, and had listened to him without ill-will, when the workings of a rising jealousy were apparent throughout the questions and comments which followed; but she felt that enough had been said for the present. Even his petition for another song had no response; and she told her mother afterwards that she thought a musical afternoon once in two months or so would be sufficient. Edward's allusion to her cousin, however, had not been lost; she was gratified that it should appear even in *his* eyes that she was the attraction; and the evening ended with her, as well as with the rest, better than it had begun.

There was no occasion for anything to be said to Sir John of Hetty's delinquency. Full well Lady Manners knew that nothing would have disturbed him more; for though the most indulgent of fathers, he was as sensitive as any Manners among them all on the point of decorum. It was not like him to be so. Indeed it was a feature in his character so ludicrously out of keeping with the rest, that it appeared rather to have been dovetailed into it after marriage, than to have been the original growth of the soil; and so it was. As the father of grown-up girls, he was a declared foe to anything that savoured of giddiness; no one, he was wont to boast, could accuse his daughters of that. No, by Jove! The Miss Manners' might go where they pleased, and people would not have a word to say against them! He did not know much about such matters, but he did know this—he would have them respected. It was not enough for a young woman to be admired—she ought to be respected; and he would not give a fig for any girl who could not make fellows keep their distance. He was proud to say his could,—every one of them. It was not every father who could say as much.

And indeed the worthy gentleman plumed himself not a little on being the parent of such orthodox young creatures, and was scarcely inclined to share even with his wife the credit of having trained them thus diligently in the way they should go.

Luckily he took much for granted, and was not a keen observer. His hearty kiss was bestowed on Hester's brow without a glance at the flushed eyelids underneath; and she had at least the relief of one unsuspecting "good night" ere she crept away to the solitude of her own chamber. To have that little abode all to herself had only once before been estimated as so high a privilege; and how far in the background of time seemed now Jem's figure in the flickering candlelight standing at the bottom of her bed, summoning her to rise and dress for the otter-hunt! That she should have dared to do so seemed all at once incredible; that she should openly have lamented when kept at home the next day, and that she should almost have been stirred up to rebel when deprived of her walk the afternoon before, seemed still more impossible to believe. After this, come what might, never again could she show disappointment or chagrin. Could she ever, indeed, speak to her cousin on the most ordinary topics, meet him, catch his eye, without shrinking? He had been spoken of as amusing himself at her expense—of behaving towards her less deferentially than he behaved to her sisters. Lady Manners had spoken, as she had herself allowed, severely; but even she had not calculated on the full effect her words produced. She could not gauge the pain she gave—pain tenfold increased because it came with all the shock of a novelty. Her tongue, if it had not outrun her feelings, had at least kept pace with every flash of indignation which darted through her mind, and had rendered it with unsparing faithfulness. Had she waited till night—had she waited but an hour—she would have been gentler, wiser; but although she would herself have repudiated the suggestion, there is no denying that the excellent mother spoke unadvisedly and in anger.

There was, to be sure, this excuse,—she had awakened from an afternoon nap, not long after the party set forth, and, feeling her cold no worse, had made up her mind to rise and come down-stairs at four o'clock, inclined to be cheered and made much of by the usually attentive daughters. She was informed too late that all had gone out for the afternoon, and a dreary hour and a half had to be gone through, and her own company had to be endured till long after dusk, when the voices of the party underneath her bedroom window, to which she had retired in dudgeon, awoke no particularly pleasant feelings in her bosom. In short, she had felt herself neglected, and was prepared to meet the recusants with, "I think you might at least have paid me the compliment of letting me know your intentions;" but when the two elder girls entered, and in no measured terms denounced their sister, all the previous petty workings of irritation were gathered up to swell the tide of her wrath; and, with scarcely a word of her own wrongs, she dismissed them, and sent for the arch offender. At another time—at any time indeed—Hester would have incurred rebuke; but it would have been different from that which now fell upon her.

It was seldom indeed that Lady Manners so spoke. She had been a gay, high-spirited girl in her youth, not overburdened, as she had herself confessed, with discretion: as the inevitable result, she was the most rigid of matrons. She knew. Having abjured all draughts of doubtful pleasure on her own account, she now abhorred them for others. She would not for worlds have her daughters learn ways which, however agreeable they might have been found once, were now odious in her eyes. She had rejoiced much in their ignorance of the world, in their simple tastes and contented spirits; and in hearing Agatha's tale, it was the grief which mingled with her indignation which gave to it its exceeding bitterness.

But, blinded with her new misery, it was no wonder that Hester was unable to see this. She had been brought up so uniformly by the one hand, had been so continually overshadowed by the one presence, that she never attempted to throw upon it the focus of her own penetration. Clever enough, quick enough as she was, she was young throughout, and the emancipating spirit of the age had not found its way to her bosom.

Every word now uttered about her, and about her cousin, she believed, and suffered under; it remained to show her resolution and her pride, and for this ordeal she must brace every nerve.

Would he but go away! Would he but keep away at least from Wancote! If he must come, could she not hide from him—shun his presence? Never to see his face again, never to speak to him again, was all she wanted; no, not even to — to — thank him for the dear little puppy he had promised, and say that she was not to be allowed to take it. What should she do if he appeared next time with it in his arms?

How could she tell him to take it back again? Perhaps he would give it to Agatha then. He would be sure to be surprised, and ask her what she meant; most likely he would be vexed; but then, if he had only been playing with her—fooling her—he had no right to be vexed. He had been cruel from the first—very, very cruel. She would not take the puppy from him—nor the stick—nor any of those pretty things he had given her at Lutteridge: she would put them all away out of sight, since she could not exactly restore them to the donor—and never, never look at them again.

She had offered shortly before to make for her cousin a woollen waistcoat like the one her father wore; no one had thought anything of her doing so at the time; her mother had herself bought the materials, and the work was by this time nearly complete. He should never have it now, she resolved. There it lay in her work-basket, and there it should remain. Should any one else have the useful article? Bertie? Jem? No indeed.

If it was not to be for him for whom it had been intended, it should never be worn by another. It should be laid by, with the Indian treasures, and some day perhaps, when years had gone by—sob, sob—she might take them out, and look at them, and think of him.

How grandiloquent are our childish sorrows; how complete and without reservation their anguish. Half measures are an abomination to us at such times,—a drop of comfort infused into the cup would be rejected with the energy of a Titan. It was really a concession on Hester's part to admit that, after years had passed, she might cast an eye upon the blighted waistcoat. I doubt if, at that moment, she contemplated ever using a crochet-needle again. Already she cast a halo of the past over everything connected with her cousin, and looked back from the future with pitying eyes upon herself lying sleepless and tossing all through the first hours of the night; until, at length, forgetfulness came in the very most pathetic portion of the tale which she was recounting at full length to her own imaginary little Hester, when she, too, should have married a Sir John, and all that was now so terrible a reality should have faded into a retrospect. The difficulty to be got over was, would she ever, under any circumstances, marry any one but Simon?

Had her mother ever felt like this about Hugh?

And that story—that love-tale—had gone so much farther, cut so much deeper!

True, but in this very consciousness lay the sting of the present wound. If he had only spoken, though it had been to be rejected, it would have been a greater and a dearer sorrow; as it was, it was but a smarting trifle. Simon would come and go as usual, look in at luncheon, and stay dinner; there would be no difference made—all would be glad to see him, all would speak to him and smile on him. Soon her offence, too, would be forgotten, when it was understood that no repetition of it need be apprehended,—when it was seen that it had led to nothing, and had terminated abruptly. He had been kind, and she had misunderstood, and that was all. This was what she had to look to; and it added inconceivably to her self-disgust and shame to feel that what was so much to her, was to all the others so little. "I never want to see his face again!" was the final outcome of her despair.

CHAPTER XIX.

IT WAS NOT HESTER'S WAY.

"Habits are soon assumed; but when we strive
To strip them off, 'tis being flayed alive."
—COWPER.

CONSTANCE was not altogether satisfied with her companion's mood on that evening so eventful to Hester. He was thoughtful, abstracted, and, though particularly kind and attentive to her, more disposed for silence than for anything she could say. She detected latent gleams of sunshine, almost breaking into smiles, upon his face, for which, when taxed with, he had no reason to give. When roused from the reverie into which he was perpetually falling, he seemed, moreover, anxious to infer that he had not been in one,—and altogether he was in a humour to stimulate curiosity already provoked, if not to provoke what had not before existed.

The expedition of the afternoon he seemed inclined to dismiss summarily; but this was too much.

"How charming it must have been!" said she. "I wish I had known you were going. But I daresay you got on just as well without me?"

"Oh no; it was a pity you were not there."

"I daresay there would not have been room in the boat."

"Plenty of room. We could have taken in a dozen more."

"You had out the large boat, then?"

"Yes."

"Who pulled?"

"Bertie and Jem."

"How is Jem still here? The Christmas term began long ago."

"He is not going up this term. The doctor advised him not, after that illness he had in the summer, I believe, and they took fright. I heard something said about it yesterday."

"I wonder what sort of illness it was that he had. I heard," mysteriously, "that it was the heart; but surely if that were the case he would not be allowed to row. Rowing is always forbidden to people who have anything wrong with the heart."

"I don't think he does row much."

"Did he—ah—did you not release him to-day?"

"He would not let me. We went slowly."

"You did not row at all? I suppose," archly, "you preferred talking with the girls."

He smiled. For once in his life he actually smiled at the supposition.

"Fie, Simon!"

Still he only leaned back, smiling. "Well, if you had all three to amuse yourself with," continued the lively dame, "you certainly needed no one besides. I should have been decidedly one too many. Had you all three?"

"All three were there, but I was not with them."

"Oho! Where then were you, recreant?"

"At the other end of the boat. Hester sat with me one way."

She was satisfied—more than satisfied; he was let alone for the remainder of the evening. At Wancote, however, it was, "Well, you water-sprites, so you can never keep off the river! To think of your going all that way up, on a

November afternoon, and not coming home till it was dark! Simon told me about it; he enjoyed himself immensely, and declared that I ought to have been there. I told him I should have been one too many."

"There was plenty of room," replied Agatha's matter-of-fact voice; "but I think, after all, it is a mistake going on the water at this time of year, unless one is rowing. We got quite chilled coming home, and our feet were so cold that we nearly landed at the Willow Point to walk the rest of the way back."

"Very sensible; and why did you not?"

"The boys had to take the boat on, and we should have had to come quite by ourselves; we could not have allowed Simon to take such a round."

"Surely you did not stop for that, you all-prudent Agatha? Three of you! Is an escort absolutely necessary for every step you take out of your own grounds?"

"The village people and poachers are often hanging about that meadow; poachers especially. Papa says the marsh is a great place for snipe. It would not have been pleasant to encounter a set of poachers, since papa has been having several of them taken up lately. They might have made themselves disagreeable. At least," said Agatha, exact as ever, "Simon and the boys thought so. I confess I forgot all about it at the time."

"Well, my Hester, when are you coming to Lutteridge again?" Constance had had enough of Agatha, whom she always averred prosed; she lolled back in her chair, tossed off her hat, and said the first thing that came to hand.

"Hester cannot expect to be always running over to Lutteridge," answered her mother for her, with a smile, but an underlying accent of determination that was not lost on three of the four present. "Now that Bertie is going, we shall want all our forces to keep us bright in this dismal weather; we cannot spare even such a small cricket on our hearth as Hetty."

"When does Bertie go?" inquired Constance, turning, as was her wont, to the new interest without pursuing the former one. "I did not know that he was to be off again so soon."

"He is to take his friend Mr West by the way. He goes to-morrow."

"Oh!" A pause; then, "Jane, I heard from Captain Cotterill this morning."

"Well?" said Jane, steadily, in accents intended to convey, "And why 'Jane'? What is that to me?"

"You are his friend, you know," explained Constance, answering the tone, and regardless of the frown on her aunt's brow—"quite his particular. Dear little man! Now don't you want to know what he said?"

"Who would not want to know what he said when you announce it in that way, Constance?"

"Spoken like an oracle. Never knew Jane Manners say a thing to be repented of yet. Well, *he* is not one of your very, horribly sensible people, at all events. He is a flighty little rat. Come now, Jane, confess that his face,—with those whiskers,—is something like a rat."

"I have never seen it without the whiskers."

"Who said you had? That is no answer. You are not as clever by half as Hester at repartee, Jane. You made one smart answer, my dear, but you failed in the second. I'll excuse you. You are dying to know what he said in the letter."

"Constance! Really——" remonstrated her aunt.

"But, my dear aunt, she is. You all are

You are perfectly famished for want of news this dreary afternoon; you especially, who have not been able to get out of doors. I know. That was why you were so glad to see me. Now if I can do anything further to make myself welcome, I am sure I am very happy. Consequently I introduce Captain Cotterill into our conversation. At least he is better than nothing, and positively we have nothing, and no one else to talk about."

"Oh, well, if that is the case," said Lady Manners, laughing, "we will gratefully accept your good intentions. So now pray tell us about Captain Cotterill."

"He is coming down here next week."

"Indeed?"

"On Tuesday next he is to appear. This being Saturday we cannot well get up a party for him on such short notice—we cannot ask any but near relations. Some one, however, we must have; and such being the dilemma, I am about to call upon you to perform the act of charity. Will you all dine with us on Tuesday?"

"Some of us will, at any rate."

"Which of you? Jane?"

"It will depend on whom you ask, my dear."

"But why not all? There will be no others."

"I am not fit to go; and Sir John, you know, is no great diner-out. I think you must be content with the young ones, Constance."

"Very well. I shall be thankful for small mercies. Now mind, Jane, that you come, whoever does not. If Jane were not present, I should be confronted by a little blank face, peeping out from between two little feathery whiskers during the whole of the entertainment. Unless Jane promises to come, I shall write and put off the man rather than endure his disappointment."

All this was not to the Wancote taste; but by this time they knew Constance too well to expect that she should conform to their standard. So long as she confined herself to raillery in which there was no undercurrent of anything more serious, they made up their minds not to take offence.

"How terrible!" said Lady Manners, even exerting herself to carry on the jest. "Surely, Jane, you will not reduce your cousin to such an extremity; surely you will intercept yourself between Captain Cotterill and his rejection!"

"My dear aunt, you alarm her. Rejection! She will think that our *petit ami* has already offered his little self to me, and that she is only to have the remains!"

"I understood he had offered himself to Lutteridge."

"Oh, that was it? You are quite right, too; he did offer himself, and gave us very little time to say 'yes' or 'no,' I can assure you. He wants to come and hunt again. Ridiculous! The water is far too high; and no one knows better than he that the season is over; but he wanted to come and see somebody here"—with a smile to Jane—"and thought that he had taken the only way to remind us of his existence."

It was settled that Jem and his two eldest sisters should join the dinner-party, Hester's accompanying them being negatived with decision; she was to stay and keep her parents company. It was a relief rather than otherwise this time. She had no wish to go; and since Constance did not press the point, a discussion was avoided. Their visitor was still lounging in her easy-chair by the fire, turning her head by turns to address one and another of the party scattered about the room, when the door opened to admit her brother-in-law.

He had come over, full of his own new thoughts and hopes, unable to delay a day in carrying, or at least beginning to carry, them into effect. He entered with the air of a man sure of his footing, and for the first time, perhaps, did not seek out his youngest cousin with his eye as he stood in the doorway. A something of consciousness just sufficient to prevent his doing so sent him straight to his aunt's side as soon as he had discovered where she was sitting. Instead of occupying her usual chair, she was ensconced in one of the large sofas, which had been turned round so as to bring it within the circle by the hearth, and a large screen had been spread behind to keep off draughts, if draughts could ever penetrate into that well-warmed and thickly-walled mansion. Lady Manners, shivering from her own chill, rather than from any sense of the damp atmosphere without, had fancied the screen; and as it was not usually to be seen, being huddled out of sight in a corner, its appearance for the moment confused Simon.

At one end of the sofa half reclined the invalid; at the other sat a little figure, who was not generally to be found in such a seat of honour. Between her mother and the fireplace, with the screen at her back, so that no intruder could approach from that quarter and leaning over whisper in her ear, Hester was, she thought, as safe as she could expect to be. She had expected her cousin; he had told her that he would bring the puppy that afternoon, and great was her relief to see that the puppy was not there.

The explanation was that the keeper thought it as well for Master Don to be left with his mother for another week; and his new mistress, on hearing the decision, acquitted herself fully as well as could have been expected under the circumstances.

She wished that Simon would not continue to stand beside her, and devoutly hoped that for this time at least no more would be heard of the puppy; but she did not show any of the gruffness, the haughtiness, the incivility she afterwards acquired, when the wound within began to fester and gangrene. For the moment her pain slept. She listened to his voice, felt his presence, breathed the same air, and could not be unhappy. He thought he had never seen her look so sweet. Since she remained by the fireside, so did he, sitting down at last in the chair next Constance, and entering into a discussion with Sir John on the poaching affray which Agatha had alluded to before they entered the room.

Hester could not tell if he ever looked at her or not. She durst not raise her own eyes above his boots, and with the odd habit we all have of scanning objects at such moments, she knew every lace and hook on them ere long. They were unremarkable boots, but they fascinated her in spite of herself, even while ostensibly stitching away with such diligence that Constance drew attention to the fact.

"Look at that little sempstress sewing for dear life; and if ever there was an idler in creation it is Hetty, as a rule. What are you making, Het? Doll's clothes? Is that a sheet for the cradle, or a long robe for Miss Dolly herself?"

As she answered, there was a pause in the poaching dialogue, and Hester knew a smile was directed towards her which she could not meet. The unintentional accuracy of the guess had, however, to be acknowledged; the doll's frock was for Ellen, and she hoped to have it ready for Constance to carry off when she left. There were only the buttons to sew on, and a tape to be run round the waist, and it would be finished—Constance must not go without it.

"You good child! And I only said it to tease! I meant to mount you on your high horse, and cause you to disdain the idea of dollies."

"I don't think Hester despises a doll by any means yet," observed her mother, with, Hester felt, the intention of Simon's hearing. "She has one out even now sometimes to look at, and it seems no very long time since she and the young Parkers had their baby-house together. But a few years make a great difference, do they not, Hetty? She has put on her long gowns now, and means to turn into a staid and sober little woman at last."

Did Simon understand? The staid and sober little woman blushed at the supposition—blushed even to think he had heard so much. She could not understand Agatha's gentle request that he would give his opinion on some mooted point; it seemed quite forward in Agatha. Jane's offering him a hand-screen, since the fire was scorching, seemed even bolder. She herself could not have set a foot in his direction—could not have spoken to him, unless he had first addressed her, for her life. She could just sit there with her head down, and listen to all that went on—so long as it did not concern her—with tolerable equanimity; but she could do no more. There was, however, no display of feeling, such as had called forth censure on the evening before. There was even a satisfactory pretence of diligence and cheerfulness, so that no eye but that which was already on the watch, could note anything unusual in Hester. He, it is true, saw; he saw and wondered, but to no purpose. As yet he had no clue to the root of the matter.

Tuesday came, and the Miss Mannerses, neatly attired in dresses not too fine for the occasion, betook themselves off to Lutteridge, under Jem's escort. Each of the sisters expected to have a pleasant evening, and neither one nor other was disappointed. Captain Cotterill was eagerly attentive to Jane, and Simon all that Agatha desired in his manner to her. He had not been vexed that only two of the three came, not having understood that the third had been asked; and, indeed, she had scarcely been asked—had received only the slightest of invitations, Constance having thought the present a good opportunity, when she expected no particular entertainment for herself—no lively young officers, no Lord Westmacott—to kill off Agatha, as she expressed it. Her attention being free to bestow on this cousin, with whom, in spite of herself, she stood on some ceremony, she thought it as well to reserve Hetty for other occasions. Hetty expected nothing, exacted nothing; she could come at any time, interfered with nobody. As for the evening in question, it clearly belonged to the other two.

Of those two, however, Jane was the queen of the night. Constance was astonished to find that, in her bantering suggestions as to the cause of Captain Cotterill's sudden reappearance, she had fallen short of, instead of overstepping the mark. He had immediately on his arrival inquired after the Wancote party—had evinced such unqualified pleasure at hearing who were expected at the Manor that evening—such interest, consciousness, and flutter, as soon as Jane's name was mentioned—that she perceived he was much more in earnest than she had had the least idea of.

Absence had fed his flame. He had heard the Miss Mannerses highly spoken of; had found that a connection with them would be in every way satisfactory, and at once gave rein to the admiration he had from the first experienced. Nothing could have been more felicitous than the arrangement which brought them to Lutteridge in that easy fashion on the very first evening of his stay. As the morrow must be prepared for, however, if he did not mean it to be wasted, he wormed an invitation out of Jem to come to Wancote early in the day. "Though what he is coming for, I am sure I don't know!" declared the insensate brother. "It was something to do with the kennels; though I told him we had not a dog in them worth looking at just now. However, as he said he would come, I just let him come."

Lady Manners, to whom this was said, did not press the point. She was seated in state when Captain Cotterill was brought in the next morning, and nobody took him round to the kennels after all. It was raining, and the billiard-table was more tempting. A great fire was announced to be wasting itself in the billiard-room; and Jem, who did not well know what to do with his guests, Simon being also present, proposed an adjournment thither. Colonel Lutteridge was an excellent player, and the girls were summoned to come and look on, if they were too doubtful of their powers to take part in the game. Agatha and Jane went, but Hester did not appear till luncheon-time. "You missed a great deal, Het," cried Jem. "I nearly came for you a dozen times, but they said you knew where we were. Why did you not come?"

"I was busy."

"Busy about what?"

"Drawing, and—writing—and other things."

"You would have been far better with us, Hester," said her cousin, cheerfully. Finding himself unaccountably baffled in his attempt to obtain a chair by her side, he had seated himself opposite; and to an observation directed so pointedly towards her, she could not turn a deaf ear.

"I had a great deal to do," she muttered. But it was a lame apology. It was not Hester's way to have a great deal to do when there was anything else going on; and the more unlike her it was, the more difficult did she find it to account for her new line of conduct.

"Hester is right, I think," said her mother, assisting her. "Billiards are all very well when there is nothing else of more importance to be done. For a wet afternoon there is no better game——"

"Will you come this afternoon then, Hester?" inquired her cousin; "we are going to have a match."

"I don't think any of the girls are much of players," continued Lady Manners. "Agatha is the best; she has the coolest head; but their cousins, Gertrude and Mary, are far better hands at it than any of us are. I used to play, but I have not done so for a long time."

"Do come. By the way, I heard you were a great player. I have never seen any really good lady players. I wish you would come."

"Oh no. The billiard-room is far too cold a place for me to-day."

"We have a splendid fire."

"The passages are full of draughts. Besides, you smoke."

"Well, yes, we do smoke. But, of course, if you were there——"

"Eh? Getting your aunt to play?" cried Sir John. "That's right, Simon. I have not seen her take a cue in hand these ten years.

She was a rare good player when we were married. None of the girls can play a bit."

But Lady Manners, though gratified, was not persuaded. No, no. She was too old; too much out of practice; her hand had lost its cunning, —in short, she was not going to lose her *prestige* and her comfortable afternoon at one and the same time.

But even while discussing the point, Simon was turning over another in his mind. Why would Hester give him no reply? And why would she speak to all the others, but avoid looking at him? He became suddenly aware that she was doing so; and then he remembered, that on the previous Saturday when he had last seen her, she had sat looking down in the same way, and that when he had spoken to her, her mother had answered. She had not dined at Lutteridge; she had not come to the billiard-room. It was unlike Hester. And the worst of it was, that there was nothing that he could complain of—nothing that he could take hold of. He could only feel, with a start of pain, that it was precisely the sort of neutral passive resistance which might be offered by a woman to a man whom she suspects has begun to give her more of his heart than she cares to possess.

CHAPTER XX.

"THEY ARE ENTERING ON A PERIOD OF ENDLESS FELICITY."

> "When sanguine youth the plain of life surveys,
> She does not count on dull and rainy days."
> —TAYLOR.

LADY MANNERS having, as will be seen, no further cause to be disquieted by her daughter's conduct, Hester was re-established in favour, and permitted to accompany her parents and Jem to the Parkers' large Christmas party, which was an annual event intended to celebrate the return home of all the men, youths, and boys of the family for the vacation or holidays, as the case with each might be. It was supposed to be exhilarating to her spirits to be seated in white muslin on a centre ottoman for twenty minutes, and handed in to dinner by a nice young Parker afterwards. Poor soul! He had a bad time of it! He did not bargain to have Miss Hester Manners reserved for him again, I warrant you. Colonel Lutteridge and his sister-in-law were not present, nor had they been expected to be, by the Wancote party, it being known that they were engaged elsewhere. Captain Cotterill was, however; and great was his chagrin at finding that the Miss Manners whom he had understood he was to meet, was Hester, not Jane. He had obtained his invitation and come again to the neighbourhood, expressly on Jane's account; and the very next day, in despair of finding another opportunity, and overcome at once by love and effrontery, he appeared at Wancote, and declared himself in due form to the lady's father.

A proper amount of hesitation having been gone through, and all inquiries satisfactorily answered, he was permitted to speak for himself; and to the secret amazement of both the elder and younger sister, he was listened to.

The gentle, serious Jane was taken with the flibberty-gibberty fellow, whose good heart and good principles she, and she alone, had discovered beneath an exterior which none but herself found attractive. She vouched for him, however; cheerfully avowed her preference; laughed at his jokes, and was deaf to everything but his praises. "The very *last* man," the others might whisper, when her back was turned, but they had not a word to say against him to her face; and, as events proved, she showed herself a better judge than they thought.

Constance was on her side from the first. "He is the best little rat in the world," she said, "and will do the thing handsomely. I always said Jane was made of sense. Now you, Agatha, would have turned up your lovely nose at a most eligible *parti*, and an excellent husband in embryo; while that monkey, Hester, would have made a *moue* in his face! You are both wrong, my children—wrong altogether; Jane has the discernment, the discrimination of the family; she sees the greatness of the soul within the smallness of the body; she—well, Jane," as the door opened, "if you had come in one minute sooner you would have heard me sounding your praises; as it is, permit me to say that you have my best wishes for your happiness, my warmest approval of your marriage, and"—with a gulp—"my highest opinion of your choice."

Simon's congratulations were also ready and sincere. He thought Cotterill the very man for Jane, and Jane the very woman for Cotterill. True, he had not studied the question previously—he had not given much attention either to the one or the other. He was pleased, he scarcely knew why. He thought he had done a good thing for his cousin, somehow; and though it was the cousin who interested him the least, still, in having made her acquainted with a respectable young fellow of good family and fortune, who had so quickly gained her affections and the consent of her parents, he felt a glow of self-approval which prompted an increase of goodwill towards all concerned.

One wedding leads to another. He would see what Hester thought about that—would find out the meaning of Hetty's pranks of late. He could not get hold of the little creature, do what he would, else—Cotterill had succeeded, and why not he? No one would have said Cotterill's chances were worth much beforehand, and all had been astonished at his success. It put new life into Simon; he resolved to lie in wait, and surprise some day the coy maiden who was now so hard to come at.

The task proved to be more difficult than he had imagined, but at length a happy thought occurred, which he resolved to lose no time in carrying into effect. On Sunday afternoons he had found out that Hester taught a class of village girls in the schoolhouse, and as the schoolhouse was only on the other side of the road, opposite one of the Wancote entrance-gates, the young teacher was allowed to go and come the short half-mile alone. The avenue she traversed lay along the river's brink, and on the raw and gusty afternoons which had set in with December no one ever came to meet her. At other times she might occasionally be joined, but he had heard her complain in jest that she had no chance of a companion now. He resolved to risk the attempt.

Accordingly, about four o'clock on the following Sunday, he crossed from the opposite side, chained his boat to the bank, and walked slowly along. Even should he be met by others, his taking a quiet stroll in their grounds would excite no surprise; he was easy on all scores, and his spirits rose in the anticipation of the meeting. He knew to within five minutes when she ought to appear, unless hindered—and that she was not likely to be, as her mother would fidget if she were late. So much he had often been told—he resolved that for once his aunt must fidget in vain.

When, therefore, having diligently taught, reproved, and exhorted, the youthful mentor dismissed her class, and set off homewards, ever conscious of that dull ache at her heart which of late had settled there, who should she see, not a hundred yards in front of her, but her cousin? For a single instant she wavered, then without pausing to reflect, or gather courage for the meeting, she dashed aside into the brushwood.

Could she hope that he had not seen her? Up and up she darted through the tangle which overhung the cliffs above, panting, tremulous, and nerveless, yet intent only on escape. Had he seen her? He had; he had come straight on, and stood now upon the spot whereon she had disappeared, looking up into the wood, as vainly seeking to find her place of refuge. From her vantage-ground, where she had halted to gain breath, and reconnoitre the country below, she could perceive him — perceive at least his figure, barred and half obscured by intervening branches. He seemed undecided what to do. What if his next step should be in pursuit? The idea set her heart palpitating afresh, and in terror she began to steal softly upwards. Cautious as her footsteps were, however, his ear caught the sound. He moved quickly to the side of the road, stopped, and called aloud, "Hester!"

Not now—not after that—could she by any means descend. What? Meet him in this lonely place, come down at his beck and call, risk inquiries and reproaches, with this additional trespass to account for also? Never. With one desperate sally she burst through the thicket, gained the plateau above, and was soon within the porch.

He turned back confounded. That something was seriously amiss he doubted no further; and unable to resist longer the fancy which had risen in his breast at Wancote, he felt it taking fresh hold of him every moment. True, he had but just discovered the state of his heart when the ominous change took place. Was it possible that she on the same day had made the same discovery? He thought—he fondly believed—he had given her no grounds for doing so. Yet there was the coincidence, and there was the undeniable result. Say that it was so; say that directly *he* knew, *she* knew; say that from that moment she, who had up to that time been so ready to listen to him, so willing to be with him, had become all on a sudden cold, distant, and reserved,—what other interpretation would make all plain? "Bah!" and "Pshaw!" as much as he might, these were the facts. It was clear that no supervision was now being exercised against Hester's own inclinations; she evinced no rebellion towards authority as of yore, no sullenness at prohibitions such as would once have made her pout—indeed she rather besought, embraced them. She was gentle and temperate in her manner towards him, but he could never gain her ear for himself. Invariably he found her in the midst of the party, not, as had been her wont, a little apart, where he could draw his chair to her side. Not once did he find her in the drawing-room alone, at this time, nor for many a day afterwards. "Came he early, came he late," she was either surrounded, barricaded by others, or she was not to be seen at all. If she appeared at Lutteridge, it was in the landau by her mother's side, and they usually called at an hour when he was out.

All this passed unnoticed by Constance, engrossed as she now was with Jane's affairs. At Wancote in the present emergency she proved herself an invaluable counsellor, an active and efficient coadjutor. Lady Manners confessed that in the matter of the wardrobe she would hardly have known what to do without the experience of a later bride; fashions had changed since her day; and since it appeared that even in her own affairs she had taken but little part, everything having been managed for her as was the way in those times, it was but too evident that she was not to be relied on even for such information as she fancied herself able to give. She was not above, on so important an occasion, taking hints even as to etiquette *à la mode.*

Captain Cotterill's family had to be made acquaintance with, and to be received at Wancote; uncles and aunts had to have civilities duly responded to; presents began to appear, and plans must be laid. The wedding was to take place as soon as a wedding could; there was no let or hindrance—everybody was satisfied, and the settlements were suitable. Accordingly it was fixed for the first week in February; and in the constant company that was now at Wancote, and the bustle consequent on the new state of things, Hester did not find the difficulty she had anticipated in carrying out her plan of defence. She stuck to it.

"If he likes me as Herbert"—Herbert was Captain Cotterill's Christian name—"liked Jane, he can speak out as Herbert did. Why, they had only met—those two—a few times, and he did not know her half nor a quarter as well as Simon knows me! Herbert did not hang back, and look at Jane, and say nothing. He came forward like a man—no one would have guessed he had it in him—and it was all settled immediately. Jane liked him, and he liked her, and there was an end of it. But how different Simon is!" A smile chased away her sigh. "I should think he *was* different! To see the two together! The 'little rat,' as Constance calls him, and the great lion! That's what Simon is. Ha, ha, ha! Certainly he's not much like one, with his smooth dark head, and his square chin, and that grim determined jaw that frightens everybody but me! Oh, if things were only different—if I only knew, if I could but believe what I once thought so sure, I should snap my fingers at that wicked mouth. But now I dare not look at it, nor at him. Everything is falling away from me instead of coming nearer, and bringing him nearer. The puppy died, and I never got my stick, and now he hardly takes any notice of me because I am so unkind to him. It is all miserable, wretched. . . . But I would not be anywhere else for the world!" She was the most useful of bridesmaids, the most active and efficient of entertainers. Simon often met her now cantering across the country with one or other of Captain Cotterill's sisters—both of them came down for Christmas; and if she were encountered out walking, she had Anne and Chatty—one on each side.

Agatha did not take nearly so much pains to make those young ladies' visit agreeable; she found time to come to Lutteridge oftener than any of the others did, and even spent a day or two there when Constance, in an unwonted fit of good-fellowship, invited her. The coming event softened Agatha; she cared for Jane more than for any other member of the family, and already felt overshadowed by the loss that was so soon to befall her. Of Jane's happiness, however, she entertained no doubts, and, indeed, regaled Constance at times with such accounts and prognostications as greatly diverted that astute auditor.

"Yes, yes, my dear," replied the lady who had been married herself, and knew all about it, "I have not the slightest doubt on the subject—recollect that *you* had, but I knew better. I am quite convinced that at the respective ages of five-and-twenty and three-and-twenty they are entering on a period of endless felicity. He is perfect, and she is perfect. All the letters on both sides say so. They vie with each other in extolling the charms of the bride and the good-luck of the bridegroom. Jane is now declared on all hands to be *the* Miss Manners, the flower of the flock, the rose of the garden, the everything of everything. So will you be, my love, when your turn comes; and finally, so will Hester. Neither of you need be tormented by the green-eyed monster, I assure you. Why, Agatha, you with all your wisdom, don't you know that the same things are said of *every* bride-elect? That the moment her banns are published, there is a general rush to be the first; hey, presto! old relations, who don't know one of the girls from another, and old friends who have not seen them since they were babies, jostling each other to be in the front rank. One vows she is the prettiest; another she is wittiest; another the one that he loves best. Some aver (if it can be done with decency) that she is all three. *Entre nous*, my dear Agatha, that was said of your humble servant a dozen times; and for at least a year afterwards I believed implicitly in my own infallibility. Now, I know better. Of course," continued the widow, not wishing to push matters too far, "I am not insinuating a word against Jane—Jane is as charming as any one could desire; and considering the celerity of our little friend, and that he is not a man of overwhelming personal attractions, he has done marvellously well for himself. At the same time, he is just the right kind of husband for her. He will keep her lively, and she will keep him in order. He has a place of his own, a good income, rather high connections, and a character that will stand election test. By the way, Simon says he once tried for a seat and failed, but means to make another attempt. I hope he will, and wish him every success. Then Jane will have a house in town, go to Court, and present you both."

Constance was so well pleased with what she chose to consider her first essay on behalf of her cousins, that her vigilance as to other matters slept. "Jack is coming down for Christmas," she said, "and the poor boy is wild to be asked to the wedding, Agatha. Can you have him? Not if it is any trouble, you know. I know that in winter one has to consider the limits of the house, and especially of the dining-room, but I thought I would just ask you."

"He is to be invited. Mamma has put him down on the list."

"How good of her! He comes to-morrow; he has been at a schoolfellow's till now, for you know I really hardly liked to ask Simon to have him here the whole five weeks. Why they give such insufferably long holidays no one can imagine. It seems to me that a schoolboy's life is *all* holidays. Listen, Agatha: seven weeks in the summer, five weeks at Christmas, and a month at Easter. Is it not absurd? How are they ever to get on in life, when they are doing nothing but running wild at home, and plaguing everybody all those months out of every year?"

"But," said Agatha, who had been meditating, "if Jack has only five weeks now——"

"*Only* five weeks! Good heavens, Agatha!"

"He will not be here for the wedding."

"Well, you see, he is so anxious to come, that—well, I suppose I do spoil him rather, but I told him he should run down for the day, if he was invited. It was weak, I know."

It was; and it was like Constance; while finding that she could easily have too much of her son when alone, she could not resist the gratification of exhibiting him in company.

"Don't scoff at me, Agatha; I am scoffing already at myself. By the way, I forgot I promised to see Ellen's bridesmaid's frock tried on before dinner. I declare, I said I was coming an hour ago, and there is the second gong! It must wait for another time, or perhaps I shall have a minute to spare when I am dressed." She had; and meeting Agatha on the stairs, bade her go down and she would follow. Simon was in the drawing-room, and the ready welcome he gave increased his cousin's good spirits; she grew quite bright under the genial influence of circumstances; he would hardly have known Agatha, usually so staid and prosaic in her demeanour; she was now almost frolicsome. Music, of course, filled up the evening, and all passed off so well, that Constance hugged herself for having paid a civility, run a risk, and escaped without harm being done. She noted that, so far from appearing oftener than he had done during Hester's stay, Simon was far seldomer visible; and that although he had taken his youngest cousin to the heronry one day, and to the hut in the woods where the young pheasants were reared another, he never asked Agatha to accompany him on his walks. All this was delightful to the hostess, and since it appeared to afford no disappointment to the guest, all went on as harmoniously as possible.

One day during Agatha's visit Simon found his way to Wancote; he had an idea, a sort of wild dim hope that with the eldest sister out of the way, and the second engrossed, he might make something of the youngest yet—might catch her alone—come upon her unawares. He was mistaken; his going was to no purpose. The ride which the young lady took that afternoon must have been prolonged, he declared to himself, on purpose. She certainly knew he was coming, since an appointment with his uncle on business had been made in her presence; but the gentlemen had quitted the house—Sir John proposing to convoy his visitor half-way home—ere Hester appeared. They passed her in the avenue; Simon had a vision of a rosy cheek and a long brown lock of waving hair, as she galloped past, and that was all. Although they stood aside and waited, by an involuntary movement of his own, no halt was made.

"Are we to have no sort of dance after the wedding?" inquired Constance that evening, she and Agatha having discussed every other point connected with it. "I know you are not ball-going people, but a little quiet country-dance among ourselves would be nice, don't you think? There would need to be only a very few people invited besides those in the house—only the Parkers, the Westmacotts, the Searles, and one or two more. Those odious little Martins would expect to be let in, I suppose. By the way, she was hinting about it the other day, when she was here. Not that she would dance herself, you know; oh dear, no! Mrs Prunes-and-Prism would consider anything like that quite out of the pale of her marriage vows; but she thought it would be nice for the 'young people.' Fact, Agatha. You and I—no, not I, perhaps—but you and Jane, and all the other girls who are not Madame, are the 'young people' with this slip of a girl! I daresay she was not a bad young person herself in the days of her youth—as she would herself call it—but she is a dreadful bride; she is an instance of what we talked about the other day, of belief in all the flattery and humbug which assails one on that dangerous pinnacle the altar. As to this dance, she wants an excuse for wearing her white satin before the Brussels point has left its rouge mark upon it! Did you know about that, Agatha? I warned Jane. The poor souls who make Brussels lace have to dip their fingers in rouge to enable the threads to bear the strain, and unless you take care, in laying it aside, you will find the dress in a pretty state when you take it out again. I did. I had no proper maid at the time; and the one I had, knew as little as I did about it. Now how about the dance?"

"Papa and mamma would never agree to it."

"Not if you and Bertie put your heads together?"

"Not if we all did."

Constance pulled a face.

"You remember how we wished to have a garden-party in the summer," continued Agatha;

"and we thought that was just the kind of thing that mamma would not dislike; but we could not prevail. We never had had a garden-party, and mamma does not care for changes. I did not care—I rather prefer dinner-parties, for my own part—but as the others wished it, I did what I could."

"I remember; Hester came to me; she could not endure the thought of those solemn festivals that we all sit down to, month after month, and year after year."

"Rather absurd in Hester, considering that she had never been at one," said Agatha, with asperity. "I don't understand her setting herself against them, before she could possibly know what they were like."

"She could pretty well guess; and I agree with her perfectly. I detest them. If anything better—even a degree better—offered, I should abjure them for ever; but nothing does. You are such a sober, old-fashioned set of folks down here, that none of you ever originate a new idea. I have tried Lady Westmacott over and over, but she always tells me to wait till Thurston comes of age—by the way, that will be next Easter, so there is something to look to; but now, Simon, what do you say? Will you try what you can do towards persuading your aunt to give a ball? No, not a ball; it would be death to our hopes to call it that; it would undo everything—ruin us at the outset. But—stop, let me think—say this, Simon,—mildly, you know, with an expression of gentle regret on your countenance that such a suggestion should be necessary,—'Dear aunt, I fear it is expected in the county that some little entertainment should be given to the neighbours on the occasion of Jane's wedding; I imagine that they will scarcely be satisfied without something. Say a small—a very small dance! Do you not think, dear aunt—you who are such an excellent judge of these matters, that it might be advisable to give a very diminutive dance—a mere trifle of a dance?'"

Both laughed.

"Well?"

They laughed again.

"Oh you two dead-weights, damping one at the outset! Well, if no one else can be found to scale the breach, to lead this forlorn-hope, I will myself volunteer. I will beard the—ahem!—don't be shocked, Agatha, I stopped in time. In my passion for metaphor, I forgot for the moment to whom I was alluding. Honestly, however, should I have any chance of success? I do not want to get myself into hot water for nothing; though, if it were for any good in the end, I have no objection to running a tilt of arguments at the beginning. Stay; there is a better than I—I will depute Hester——"

An inarticulate exclamation, proceeding she could scarcely tell from which, stopped the speaker. Agatha's frown she could understand, but Simon was positively scowling!

PART VI.

CHAPTER XXI.

AFTER THE FESTIVAL.

"Idly did we bend our eyes upon one another, when the chief performers in the morning's pageant had vanished. No one knew whether to take their leave or stay. We seemed assembled on a silly occasion."
—LAMB.

THE wedding was over, the bride and bridegroom had departed, and the wedding guests turned and confronted one another with a stare of surfeit. It seemed years since they had seen other faces than those they were now gazing upon; ages since all that babble, and chatter, and millinery had been collected into the space before them. The blue gown and the purple gown, the embroidered yellow and the dull brocade, had grown to be a part of the furniture; the swan's-down bonnet had become associated to the end of time with the crimson necktie which approached it so continuously.

Tired and flushed faces now looked wearily round, wondering how soon they might slip away to their own homes, or—as most of those present were staying in the house—to their own chambers. Bonnet-strings had become loosened, and gloves had been thrown aside. It was felt by all that there had been enough; they were satiated—stupefied.

It had indeed been an interminable affair. For five mortal hours they had stood and sat, eaten and drunk, talked and smiled in battle array, and all at once ensued the collapse. Lady Manners, in her bronze satin, wondered if Mrs Cotterill, in her dove silk, could be as weary as she was. She had attended on Mrs Cotterill, presented Mrs Cotterill, done her part by Mrs Cotterill till she could do it no more. When not engaged with her, there was Mr Cotterill; when free from him, there was Miss Cotterill. Cotterills confronted her whichever way she turned. When puzzled by the presence of a strange countenance at her own board, she knew it must be that of a Cotterill; when accosted by a new voice, it could be none other than a Cotterill's.

Weddings had come but seldom in the way of the bride's mother, and she was astonished at the all-pervading element of Cotterill; she did not understand the rampant ascendancy obtained on such occasions by the relations of the bridegroom. No cares, no responsibilities attach in any way to them; and but rarely is there in their hearts the grief, the void, the sense of loss which hangs its shadow over the family of the bride. They are unweighted; they come to make merry and rejoice; they expect to be put forward, made much of, given the seats and places of honour. Their dresses are sure to be chronicled in the public accounts, whosever garment may be omitted; their names, down to that of the least in his father's house, are written down.

When Lady Manners read, the next morning, that Mr J. Cotterill, Mr J. C. Cotterill, and Mr J. A. H. Cotterill had been present, she almost thought that she could never care to hear the name of Cotterill again.

Had she come to know these people in an ordinary way, they might have been found sufficiently agreeable; but to have thrust upon her a crowd of people with whom she was, while ignorant of everything connected with their tastes and characters, at once required to be intimate—who took it for granted that their representative was all to her that he was to them—who usurped Jane, adopted her then and there, and expected from her in all time to come, Cotterill sentiments and Cotterill prejudices,—was, it must be owned, a trial to Jane's mother. She could not even obtain her parting kiss in peace; and although her sense of justice acknowledged the well-meant pressure of Mrs Cotterill's hand, she would have dearly liked to have extended that pressure into a shake, and have said "Good-bye" to her on the spot.

It was the presence of this lady which chained her to her post in the great saloon, now that she yearned to be in solitude and at rest. Had it not been for her dread of that slim woman by her side, whose cheeks were only faintly pink, and whose dove-coloured robe was as trim as when it was first put on, our poor mother, whose heart was full, and whose eyes were red, would have been able to cast off her heavy bronze armour, and lay her tired head, divested of its plumed bonnet, on the peaceful pillow. The few old neighbours who were now waiting for their carriages would have taken no offence had Agatha been deputed to receive their adieux, and her absence would have been unperceived by the multitude; but she could not elude Mrs Cotterill—and what Mrs Cotterill would think, held her fast.

Constance was the first to find out her hostess for parting congratulations. "Carriage come at last!" she said, gaily. "How tired you look, poor Auntie! How thankful you will be to get rid of us all! Everything has gone off *so* well, has it not? And the weather has behaved admirably; it is raining fast now, did you know? If it had begun a few hours ago everything would have been spoilt, and now it does not matter in the least. I was terribly afraid when we were in church; I thought I heard a patter. Good-bye. I am sure no wedding could have passed off better."

"Agatha," said she, as she left the room, "you ought to send everybody away as fast as you can, before things begin to drag."

Devoutly Agatha wished they would go. Cheerful and attentive to all, watchful that none were neglected, that no part was overstrained, no eldest daughter of a house could have appeared to greater advantage than Agatha had done throughout the day. As chief bridesmaid, she had of course been relegated to the care of Colonel Lutteridge, the "best man." She had walked on his arm down the church aisle, aware that at least as many eyes were resting curiously upon them as were upon the pair in front; she had sat by her cousin during the long repast which followed, contrasting him secretly meanwhile with the minute Cotterills and the rustic Mannerses by whom they were surrounded; and proud of her kinsman, of his looks, his air, and his near relationship, she had paraded him as much as she could in view of the allied forces. But she had omitted no duty, overlooked no stranger on his account, and even Constance was satisfied that since on this occasion it was not within her province to show off her brother-in-law, Agatha should do it for her. He was brought up to one and another, and had scarcely a minute to himself during the festival. One opportunity, however, came to him. The guests were being marshalled to breakfast, and that duty having devolved on Bertie and his eldest sister, it was much more quietly and prettily done than is the case when it is performed by servants. Agatha, of the two, gliding from one to another with her soft intimations, was the best performer. She had just united a couple, each of whom was known to be so uninteresting as to have been certainly avoided by more attractive people, when her eye fell on Hester standing within the large bay-window looking out, and Simon at her back.

"Mr Cotterill," said Agatha, quick as thought, to one of Herbert's brothers, "will you go next with my sister Hester?"

"Hester is coming with me," said Simon, hastily, with a sudden reassumption of his old appropriating tone.

It was ill-timed. The bridesmaid flushed defiantly, as she turned from the window and passed him without answering; while Agatha explained, "I am afraid you are bound to me; we must sit on Jane's left hand, but we shall all be together. Keep near us, Hester; you will find your places left for you." They found them—on her other side; Hester was as much separated from her cousin as though the whole length of the table had been between them.

Of late Simon had given up attempting to explain away the gloomy interpretation of her behaviour towards him which had presented itself first to his mind. It was but the impulse of the moment, when he saw her unattended in the window-recess, and unnoticed in the surrounding hubbub, which had prompted him to draw near. He had gone up and spoken to her, and she had made him some ordinary reply. Then he had asked if she were tired, and the question had been put in such a tone that she had turned and looked out of the window. His courage rose ; he waited a moment to consider, and that moment was fatal. Had he offered his arm and walked her off to the dining-room while she was collecting herself, and whilst Agatha's back was turned, he would not afterwards have been moved from his purpose by any one ; he would have stuck to his seat and his bridesmaid ; he would in all probability have found out all that he wanted to know, and this little history need never have been written.

But the opportunity passed. Agatha's eye fell upon them ; she had pounced upon Hester's Cotterill, and had brought him to her ere Simon had found his tongue, and his hasty and unguarded assumption, his "Hester is coming with me," was the wrong thing at the moment. Her pride flew to arms, and without so much as deigning a negative, she placed her hand within the arm presented to her.

Mr J. Cotterill was her portion—Herbert's next brother, and another edition of himself. They were all "ratty," Constance affirmed,—had all the same small pointed noses, narrow chins, and thriving whiskers, even down to the tiny thing, the J. A. H., who was about the size of a harvest-mouse.

All were excellent chatterboxes, and in high feather, as was natural. Even at the last, when Agatha in the doorway was sighing her satisfaction over the final departure, and when her mother was imploring Mrs Cotterill, as they separated, not to think of coming down again before eight o'clock, the youthful brothers and cousins of the bridegroom frolicked in the hall, —they were fencing with walking-sticks when Lady Manners passed through.

The bridesmaids, having had enough for the present of flattery and flirtation, now moved languidly up-stairs, in yawning anticipations of dressing-gowns and a dressing-gown tea, over which Hester, more languid than any, but willing to be in company rather than alone, presided. Agatha excused herself. She wisely retired to solitude, to think and smile, perhaps to shed a softened tear or two; but certainly she reappeared at dinner-time refreshed and bright, ready again for all the duties and pleasures of her position.

Singing without Jane was a momentary effort; it cost her a pang to see the well-known duets so often gone through together; but she called to Hester, and Edward Searle joined them, and he was particularly pleasant, and thoughtful, and inobtrusive in his admiration, so that without being conscious why, the evening passed for her as well as the morning had done. No one from Lutteridge came again, and she was not sorry—she was glad to have a quiet close to a day so exciting and successful.

On the following morning as many as could ride were swept out of the way by Bertie, who had begged and borrowed mounts for such as the Wancote stables could not afford horses for, to join the hunt, which luckily met at no great distance from the Hall on that day. The rest yawned in the billiard-room until the afternoon, when they were politely got rid of; and the next day only a few elderly folks and near relations remained to be entertained. Having come from a distance in mid-winter, they thought they might as well stay for several days at least after the great event. It was a mistaken notion; the days dragged. Nevertheless they came to an end, as others do, however long; and at length the last carriage rolled from the door, and the last flicker of the candle was put out.

The drawing-room looked its comfortable homely self once more. Lady Manners resumed the ancient black velvet evening robe, which had not been allowed to run the gauntlet of Mrs Cotterill's eye, and Sir John got, as he expressed it, his dinner at a decent hour again.

"I do think it is the most ridiculous nonsense," said he, "to make a change for anybody. Cotterill likes to dine at seven as well as I do, I'll be bound! In my young days it was six—ay, and five! My father and mother dined at five o'clock every day of their lives. I was quite ill for want of my dinner all the time those people were here. Heigh-ho! well, that's over, anyhow. I hope Jane's content. I am sure I am."

"Did you take Mr Cotterill to see the church on the hill, papa?" said Agatha. "He told me he wanted to go to it."

"To the church? Oh yes, I took him. I

took him here, there, and everywhere. I toiled about with him day after day. He had the most insatiable twist for seeing rubbish, of any one I have ever had to do with; you could not name a place, or a tree, or a stick, or a stone, but he wanted to see it! I am sure no one can say that I did not do my part by him,—eh, Emily? what do you say? Did I not, now?"

"Oh yes, my dear, you did your part, of course. So did we all." (She thought hers had been the harder part of the two.) "We all, I hope, tried our best."

"All? Not one of you came near him! I had him on my hands from morning till night. Wherever I went, there went he. He stuck to me like a leech. Do what I would, I could not get rid of him, and—by the way, I thought I understood that they were to have gone yesterday; how came they to stay till to-day?"

"The young ones had an engagement, but when I found the father and mother were going straight home I had to ask them on; I thought they rather expected it."

"That was it? Well, they're gone at last; and I really think it all passed off as well as could have been expected. Did it not, eh? Not a break-down; not a bungle made of anything. No *contretemps*, eh, Agatha?"

His French always caused a laugh. He looked round to see why.

"Did you think there was? What are you laughing at? Was there anything wrong? Can't you say? Tell me if there was."

"Nothing whatever, papa; we were only laughing at your '*contretemps*.'"

"Hoot! Is that all? If you have nothing but that to find fault with, I don't care a button; I was afraid there had been something you did not wish to tell me about. I thought that perhaps Bertie—eh——?"

"No, indeed; Bertie was very good and nice," said his mother. "I was really quite touched with poor Bertie. He came and sat in my room after it was all over, and seemed quite low; he was always so fond of Janie."

A pause; then, "Well, I'm sure I did my part by old Cotterill," reverted Sir John, "and Mrs Cotterill too. She seems a nice woman. I took her all round my collection, and showed her everything. She was quite interested. Really she made some good remarks. I meant to have taken her to the rookery, but there was no time."

"Indeed? I should not have thought any one need have complained of want of time," Lady Manners smiled. "It seemed to me as if we should never get through each day. I should have been only too glad if you would have carried her off for an hour, it was really—whether I went in or out, to have her always sitting there, in the one attitude, with her work before her! I got so tired of the sight——"

"I thought you liked her," burst in her husband.

"So I did like her. There is a great deal that is very good and amiable about her; but one does get terribly tired of a woman who sits the whole day long in one gown——"

"She changed it for dinner, mamma——"

"She could not change her *face*. It was the face more than the gown that never altered. Her little thin set of features, and her one smile——"

"Mamma, mamma!"

"Well, Hetty, you must let me say it for once. If I am unfair to poor Mrs Cotterill, at least I have kept it to myself all this time, and you don't know the relief it is to me now that she is gone. You young ones could come and go, and amuse yourselves sometimes with one and sometimes with another, but I had to be with Mrs Cotterill or with nobody. Would you not have felt naughty too—come, Hetty—if you had been in my place?"

"Ay, that was it!" said Sir John, reflectively. "That was just what I had to be with Cotterill. I never could get away from him, and he was such a queer poky fellow, always wanting to go ferreting in some out-of-the-way hole or other. I am sure when he was cross-questioning me about Roman remains, and Druidical temples, and what not, I did not know which way to look! Did any of you ever hear of a Roman circle, or camp, or anything of that sort, within the park? I am sure I never did."

None of them had. "He seemed to know all about it," continued their father; "he pestered me with questions till I was nearly beside myself. Was it here? Was it there? Where was there a stream of water running into the river by the side of the hill? I supposed he meant Barley Hill, so I took him there, but he could not find the place. He made me wait for nearly an hour while he tackled an old man by the roadside, who did not know the country one quarter as well as I did."

"Did you take him to Lutteridge, papa?" said Agatha.

"He did not care to go to Lutteridge; there were no 'remains' there, he said. Really a man makes a noodle of himself when his brain runs on nothing but nonsense of that sort."

It was not, in short, Sir John's hobby, and he could not understand it. Would his guest have talked of breech-loaders, muzzle-loaders, setters and pointers, he would not have found his companionship wearisome. Would Mrs Cotterill have laid down for half an hour of the day her canvas-work, Lady Manners would have been better able to endure her smile. She was no needle-woman, Sir John no antiquarian, and thus all sympathy of taste between them and their guests was wanting. While he complained that his contemporary made a noodle of himself over Roman camps and remains, she was exclaiming, aside, "How can any human being spend whole days doing worsted-work?"

Even Agatha and Hester had their minor grievances; Anne and Chatty had developed traits that had not been altogether expected.

Anne had shown herself a flirt, and Chatty was found to have nothing in her beyond a good temper, good spirits, and good manners. On the whole, the family had outstayed their welcome, and would have done well to have departed directly after the marriage compact had been signed and sealed. People like the Manners get into their own ways of thinking too much to assimilate readily with others; and people like the Cotterills are better liked at first and at last than during that intermediate stage, which is the test of those who are really excellent, but not quite so excellent as has been at the beginning imagined.

"But, poor souls, they came to enjoy themselves," said Constance, when Hester had confided to her something of the state of the case; "and I suppose they found it all very pleasant; you could not expect them to betake themselves off in a hurry. It was only a pity you had no dancing—that would have passed the evenings, and I'll answer for it, every one of those little Cotterill brothers would dance like greyhounds. They were eyeing the floor at the wedding, and they whispered to me an inquiry as to whether the gallery was ever used for balls? You may be sure I put my finger on my lips, Agatha. But I must tell you one thing—Herbert is a lovely partner; it is the best thing he is at. Well, he is a good little man, as I always said; and by this time, or soon—very soon after this week—you may prepare to see Jane a Cotterill from head to foot. Between ourselves, I would sooner have the Cotterill *foot* than the *head;* but then she never set up to be clever."

"Although Mr Searle did say in his speech," said Hester, "that she had 'the brightest intellect, the most intell—i—gent observation, the sweetest disposition.' Stop a moment. 'No fairer ornament has ever adorned these ancient walls' (as if she had been a picture); 'no kinder heart has ever dwelt among these ancestral domains; no more beloved daughter, nor sister' (here he began to get mixed), 'nor young friend —ahem!—ahem! Known her from a cradle! First break in the family!' (everybody's eyes on their plates)—'ahem! ahem!'"

"Hester, how can you?" said Agatha, angrily.

"How can I?" Hester was grave in a moment. "I'll tell you why I can. Because it was the most absurd speech ever made; because it made Jane cry, and us all wretched; because it was not the time nor the place for Mr Searle to show off his own eloquence at our expense. He knows nothing whatever about Jane, or he would know that she has *not* the brightest intellect; and about her being the fairest ornament was all *fudge*——"

"True," observed Constance, in parenthesis; "what I always said: she is neither the prettiest nor the wittiest."

"I never was so angry with any one in my life," continued Hester, her eye kindling with growing indignation. "What business was it of his? Though we have known him in a sort of a way 'from a cradle,' he has never shown any particular affection for one of us; and as to his pretending emotion, and making his voice tremble, it was done for effect, and for nothing else!"

"Of a piece with the letters, Agatha," said Constance, dryly. "Where does Hetty get her worldly wisdom from? You, my love, were fairly taken in. That stupid old proser! He made me quite cross, I know; and I thought he might at least have let the poor bride get to the farewell scene before he spoilt her beauty; for she did look remarkably nice before: to tell you the honest truth, Agatha, I was quite struck with

Jane, for I had not expected that she would look so pretty. All wedding speeches are a mistake, but this was insufferable. A bride should go off in tears, *cela va sans dire*, but she ought not to be seen afterwards."

"Oh, Constance," said Agatha, "you are too deep for us. Fancy Jane's thinking whether she was to be seen afterwards or not!"

"It should be thought of for her, then. Hester thought of it, you see. Hester, my child, you did not look your best. Agatha was quite the show bridesmaid; as for the others, none of them were much. It was a pity you had not me," said Constance, candidly. "But how was it, Het? I meant you to look rosy and bonnie, and you were grey all over, and there was no life in you!"

"I hated the whole thing," sobbed Hester.

CHAPTER XXII.

"I HAVE WON HER BACK SO FAR."

"Poets, like lovers, should be bold and dare ;
They spoil their business with an over care ;
And though they stumble in a full career,
Yet rashness is a better fault than fear."
—DRYDEN.

HOWEVER long one subject may remain paramount in a rural neighbourhood, it must at length give place to another. For nearly two months the Cotterill interest reigned supreme at Wancote, but no sooner was it announced that Lord and Lady Westmacott were about to come down and celebrate their eldest son's coming of age by a series of entertainments, than the Cotterill star set, and the Westmacott sun arose.

The first desire in every quarter was, of course, to be themselves invited ; their next to know which of their neighbours had been likewise favoured. There was to be a dinner, a football match, divers sports, and a ball,—to all of which both the families at Wancote and at Lutteridge were bidden. To the last the Miss Mannerses were to be escorted by Constance; and as Lutteridge lay three miles nearer to Westmacott Castle than Wancote, they were to remain there for the night.

Hearing of this arrangement brought Simon home. He had left almost immediately after Jane's marriage, and had not been expected to return till the summer; but Constance, anxious to take her brother-in-law to a house where she always strove to appear to advantage, sent a piteous entreaty that he would run down for the festivities. She received only a dubious reply; but her next note brought him.

"We shall be three lone women," she had written, "for I do not choose to beg an invitation from Lady Westmacott for any one; and neither Bertie nor Jem can be here. Aunt Manners is not well, and Sir John says he cannot leave her, so they have asked me to take the girls—nice for them, and for us too! We shall be far jollier by ourselves; but still we must have a man of some sort. They will stay the night here—Agatha and Hetty, I mean—so as to let the parent birds get quietly to roost, and save all trouble. Do come, if only for the ball; I will let you off all the rest."

He arrived as the carriage which brought his cousins over drove to the door. "Well, Constance, I am here," he said. "You said you wanted a man of some sort, so I thought I might just fill that category; I warn you that I don't dance."

"You are the best fellow in the world," cried she. "I knew you would come. I knew you would not leave us in the lurch. Now we shall be a compact party, exactly right. Oh, I was so put out when I thought we should have to go by ourselves, Agatha."

It might have been that Agatha had shared the feeling, such an unusual glow of animation was now painted on her cheek. She quite outstripped Hester in anticipations of the evening's enjoyment; and it was she, not Hetty, who insisted on taking off her long cloak—for they had come already dressed for the ball—and displaying the hidden billows of millinery within, to Constance, during Colonel Lutteridge's absence up-stairs. A quarter of an hour was allowed him to make ready; and since they had to wait so short a time, Hester declined to uncloak, averred that it would be a great deal of trouble to tuck herself up again, that her flowery garland would be crushed if once let down, and finally, that it was too cold—with a shiver—to unwrap for any one.

"Hester, you are shivering from excitement, not cold. Poor innocent—no wonder! Your first ball! My child, you are burning hot; your little round cheek is like a ball of fire; it will be cooler and whiter when you come back to-night! By the way, Agatha, you don't dance?"

"No; I don't care for it."

"But Hester does?"

"Hester does," said Hester, for herself. "Hester would stay at home if she did not. What would be the pleasure of going, if one had to sit still in one place and look on the whole time? What is there to look at? The same stupid faces that one sees at dinners, I suppose; with not even the chance of hearing anything amusing, if everybody but yourself is busy. I cannot think why Agatha cares to go."

"One likes to see one's neighbours," said Agatha; "and there is no need to sit still the whole time in one place; one can move about, and go in to supper."

Constance shrugged her shoulders. "Does it make you uncomfortable, Agatha?"

"I don't know," said Agatha, honestly, "for I have never tried."

"If it was that, I could understand. I know it does make some people quite wretched—men as well as women: my cousins the Townshends delight in dancing, but they get giddy immediately; if that is your case, I pity you; but you will have Simon to bear you company to-night, at all events."

And accordingly it appeared, at least in Hester's eyes, that during the first part of the evening Simon had nothing to do but to bear the lady company. It being found that the second sister danced, and that she was a charming partner, and the only available Miss Manners, her hand was sought on all sides. Ere the ball had well begun her card was full, for she had not only to give every neighbour and friend a turn, but all the partners whom Lady Westmacott in her civility desired to divide between the sisters were relegated to her; all the strangers who were thought to be suitable acquaintances for the daughters of Sir John Manners had to be content with writing their names on one list, and she had soon the pleasure or the pain of seeing it entirely filled.

She gave one uncontrollable look at Simon. It escaped ere she knew; and though she turned her head immediately the other way, she was aware that it brought him to her side. "Well, Hester," he said, cheerfully, "you will have a merry evening. You have been quite beset. It is hardly fair of Agatha to let you in for all her partners as well as your own; may I take a look?"

"You know I don't dance," he continued; "but there is a break somewhere, I suppose. I'll take you in to supper, if I may?" It was spoken so pleasantly, so courteously, so exactly in the tone in which Agatha or even her aunt might have been addressed, that she could only assent, and he fancied she did so readily. It was hard after that to find himself, when the hour came, seized upon to conduct a titled dame to a seat of honour, his only consolation being that, looking up and down the tables, he could nowhere perceive the lady he had meant to take. She was still waltzing when he returned to the saloon, easily detected among the few now on the floor; and within five minutes he had her on his arm.

His heart beat high. "Now," he thought, "my chance is come at last. I must be wary. I must not venture too far. I must have no explanations; they can wait. All I now want is to re-establish our old friendly footing, to get her no longer to shun me, no longer to fear me; and then, Hester, *then*——"

Accordingly he was grave, polite, and rather silent. He made no attempt at settled conversation, saw only that she had enough on her plate, and when her eating proved to be a failure, insisting on wine. She was then taken back, but not to the ball-room. "You owe me a dance," he said. "More than one, I should say. I am sure I have heard somewhere that after-supper engagements never hold good—isn't that true? Come and sit down here," throwing back a door; "oh — it's full! Never mind, Hester; I know a better place: they are sitting on the window-seats along the old gallery; I saw them just now. Will you come there? Don't refuse."

The last words startled her. They were spoken with an energy unusual in him, and she hesitated, considering what might next be coming? What had she to fear? What to hope? Were he to begin by taking her to task by questions and reproaches, it would be awkward, and she would hardly know what to say. Thrown off her balance, and in the extremity of the moment, she certainly was not happy in her reply: "If you—will promise—not to say anything."

"Say anything! What sort of thing? What do you expect me to say?"

They were pushed into a corner, and she could scarcely catch the words, far less tell with what expression they were spoken; but she found that he had not relinquished his purpose: she was being led into the gallery, and a very empty gallery it was. Only one pair of turtle-doves cooed in a distant recess, and another at the far end paced slowly up and down.

"What am I not to say?" repeated Simon, as soon as the coast was clear. "Whatever you bid me, I will do; whatever I am not to do, I will refrain from. Can I offer more?"

"No—but——"

"What are you afraid of? Not of *me?* Dear Hester, I will not say a word of any sort to distress you; surely you know me better than to suppose I would?" But his spirits sank, for he thought, "She is now afraid I am going to begin my suit, and is doing all she can to stop me. It is as I suspected. Whatever happens, a word at this juncture would be premature."

Then he essayed to soothe. "I am afraid I have vexed my little cousin sometimes of late," he said. "You have had some charge against me in your own mind, Hester. Now do not tell me what it is, if you would rather not; but if it be what I imagine, you need not"—emphatically—"give another thought to the matter. I will never be the cause of annoyance to you. Should a time come——" He paused.

"Yes?"

"We will leave it to take care of itself," subjoined he, briskly. "We will have nothing to do with it just now; no omens, no prognostications to-night. Only, Hester, there was one day when you ran away from me in the avenue——"

She winced.

"You remember?"

"Oh, don't."

"Certainly not; I am not going to be troublesome,—don't fear. I merely wished to say that

I hoped you would never again feel that such an avoidance of me was necessary. Let us be friends without your having any anxiety, dear, lest I—should wish—to overstep the bounds—of friendship."

He spoke slowly, and as one who had weighed his words well beforehand, and so wisely were they chosen that, though they destroyed in the listener's heart any hopes that might still have lain dormant there unknown to herself, they gave to her pride a momentary thrill of gratification.

He had understood her, then; by her own unaided efforts she had shown that she was not to be trifled with, and he would not again presume. It was now but four short months since the tragical night on which she had forsworn love and happiness for ever; and here she was almost, if not quite, ready to feel that to meet him, to speak with him, smile on him once more, would be possible. During those months she had, it is true, with all the ardour of youth, stood to her guns; she had lived without him, shunned him, thwarted him, thrust him aside whenever he attempted to break down the invisible barrier,—but she was growing tired of the task. To have so excellent an opportunity given for throwing down her arms was not to be despised; and only too glad to have such a turn given to a discussion which trenched on dangerous ground, she put her hand in her companion's, and accepted the conditions.

Too quickly the time passed, and she was hunted out and taken from him ere he had said more than a few common-places, ere he had fully realised all that had been accomplished; but the face of his little cousin wore a subdued look of inward peace for the remainder of the evening, which he felt had not been there before.

"She cares for me a little," he mused, watching from the background. "Not as I care for her: she has not yet learned what that great awakening is. But still she thinks of me—she is pleased with me—I have brought that smile to her lips. Well, I have won her back so far—I am no longer to her a trouble and a terror; and now to tame my nestling to my hand."

"Colonel Lutteridge, you are not dancing!"

Colonel Lutteridge did not dance.

Lady Westmacott was shocked at him, wondered what he meant by acknowledging such a thing. Not dance, when so many charming girls were present, and when, do what she would, some of them had to sit down every time? Shocking! Look at his sister-in-law, look at the lovely Mrs Lutteridge, what an example she was to everybody! Quite the belle of the room; and so indefatigable that nothing seemed to tire her. Lord Westmacott pronounced her the best dancer as well as the prettiest woman present.

He bowed.

"Your cousin, Miss Manners, of course might dispute the last assertion; but she—ah—lays no claim—does not compete in the matter of the first. It is too bad of you both!" In her tone there was a sudden accent of intelligence, of recollection, a latent "Oho, I begin to see!"—but it was lost on him.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "she is dancing now with your son."

"What? With Thurston? No, that is Hester, the sister who is just out of the schoolroom—a sweet face—but of course you know. I was speaking of *Miss* Manners, of Agatha. She has sat down all the time."

He had entirely forgotten Agatha. He saw now that she occupied a chair at the upper end of the room, unattended, and with rather a grave face watching the spectacle. In her own mind Lady Westmacott wondered if they had had a quarrel—she gave him credit for a poor attempt to draw off her attention by remarking on Hester; she went off convinced that she had penetrated into the secret of an interesting attachment—and the sight of the two together afterwards, and the smiles which presently reappeared on the lady's face, confirmed her respect for her own sagacity.

Agatha had certainly expected that, after so fair a beginning had been made, Simon would have been more at her service throughout the evening than had proved to be the case. Since neither of them were taking part in the dance, and since Constance and Hester were equally unlikely to have any idle time on their hands, there was certainly no reason why the two, thus left to themselves, should not have spent the greater part of every hour together. At least she thought so; but there was another person besides the proverbial host on whom she had not reckoned. This was Edward Searle, who, although a clergyman, and supposed in a general way to abstain from such diversions, had come to the Westmacotts' ball, because, he said, they were such old friends, and he and Thurston had been schoolfellows, and it was a special occasion. The statements were correct, and the reasoning sufficiently plausible; but it was patent to all that he was there for the simple reason that Agatha was there.

Here again was another non-performer; and so long as he remained, matters were well enough. She would not have allowed that at any time she experienced a sense of desertion—a forlornness to which she was unaccustomed,—but certainly after Mr Searle's departure she was more than once at a loss. It is all very well for one to elect one's self to stand aside and see the giddy throng go by, but when the giddy throng persist in going by hour after hour—when, with glowing, laughing countenances, they bestow that pity which is nearer akin to contempt than love on the one who takes no part—when even the elders descend from their pedestal to take a sober turn as the crowds diminish,—for one who still holds stoutly out, the time is long. She tried to say it was not, tried to speak cheerfully, and assure Constance that she was not fatigued —was enjoying herself as much as they were;

but Constance knew better. "I would really have ordered the carriage an hour sooner on Agatha's account, if I had thought of it," said she to Simon,—she could afford to say it, since the time for doing so was past. "I am quite sorry for her; she looks so dismal, sitting there all alone. Do go, and take her off to get something; make her move about. I declare it is quite depressing to feel one's self followed about by her poor half-shut eyes, and to know that she is crying shame on us all, for keeping her still here when she is sick of the whole thing! As for Hetty, does she not look a little rosebud? Half the boys are in love with her; and Thurston has thrown over a host of engagements for her sake, I know. Lady Westmacott says she can't spare either of us yet; she looks to us to keep up the spirit of the ball to the end."

"The end must be pretty near at hand now."

"Half the people are staying in the house, you know; and they have no idea of stopping yet. Oh yes, I believe it is ours, Mr Lester. Now, Simon, do just go and keep Agatha quiet."

Thus adjured, he again approached his cousin, and suggested, in accordance with instructions, a turn through the rooms. They were too empty now, however, Agatha thought, for such a promenade; they would be too much observed and commented on: had he taken her when the ball was at its height, it would have been different—as it was, she thanked him, preferred to stay where she was, and as he took a seat by her side, Lady Westmacott caught a look of pleasure whose meaning she settled on the spot.

"Poor Edward Searle!" she said, benevolently,—for she was quite cognisant of the bait which had lured the hapless Edward to her feast. "But really, with such a rival, who could hope for success? His chances may go to the winds if Colonel Lutteridge is in the way."

Then a compliment had to be paid Constance on her having brought *the* party to the ball, and she was assured that without them — without herself and her two lovely cousins, and Colonel Lutteridge—the evening would have been shorn of half its ornaments.

"We only needed the bride: Captain and Mrs Cotterill should have been with us; we owe them a grudge, I assure you," averred the hostess, in the height of her complacency; "but still, you have been so kind, helped us so much, we must not remember the delinquencies of others."

The reply was a matter of course. With sparkling eyes Constance could sincerely declare that the evening had needed no one—needed nothing in her eyes. It had been a complete and entire success from beginning to end; she did not know when she had enjoyed a ball so much. The sentiment was echoed, but faintly, by Agatha. She could assure her hostess of the general satisfaction, but she could not dilate on her own share in it—she could not aver that she had never enjoyed a ball so much.

Then came little Hester, who said not a word, but looked up into the face of the kind dame with a smile so strangely sweet that Lady Westmacott, by a sudden impulse, bent down and kissed her. "Good night, my pretty child," she said. "You ought to have been in bed hours ago. Don't stay up as late as this often, dancing the roses out of these little cheeks"—touching them with her finger—and then she stopped short.

Colonel Lutteridge was in front of her, looking on. His eyes lit up with such a sudden and sympathetic flash, as, the kiss given, she drew herself up and met them, that when, the next minute, they sank down and rested on the place whereon it had been bestowed, while there was a pause in which she could note it all, she forgot what she was going to say further, in puzzled astonishment. Constance and Agatha had passed on, and no one else was near; the principal actor in the little scene had a full minute to make her observations. "It was very odd," said she afterwards, shaking her head at the recollection. "I do not understand that Colonel Lutteridge. It is *one* of the sisters, I am convinced, but which, I am not so sure about."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SECOND MEETING BY THE RIVER.

"Striving to better, oft we mar what's well."
—LEAR.

In spite of an evening which had been at least partially satisfactory, Simon did not find matters go on quite so smoothly as he had looked for afterwards.

True, there was now no more open defence on Hester's part, no further surrounding herself with social barricades, no turning aside when brought face to face, but there was a shadowy intangible something which seemed ever to prevent his progressing with her beyond the point he had already reached. So long as he kept to ordinary dialogue, so long as he chose a seat a yard or two away from her side, all went well: but did he advance a hair's-breadth towards a change of tone, she snapped him up; did he touch her hand, were it but accidentally, she knit her brow. He learned to depend upon her looks, studying her face as though it were a chart by which he might steer on his difficult course. Once or twice he was surprised; when taken at unawares he caught lights and shadows, fluctuations and tremors, that were not attributable to any known source. Sometimes it was a blush, sometimes a sigh—once he could have sworn it was a shudder. She gave him no chance of finding out what that shudder meant. He was alone with her in the room for fully half an hour afterwards, and she handed him a book-knife and an uncut magazine. He took it mechanically, met a hard determined look, and began hastily to sever the pages.

She questioned him afterwards as to the merits of the paper he had been engaged upon. Was it the opening one on the state of the French army, or the comedy in verse which followed? She had found those two articles cut, and supposed he had not needed to proceed further.

She was right, he said, as usual; he had not needed to proceed further.

"You were not reading?"

"No; I was thinking."

"You do not think when you read?"

"I do not read when I think."

"Why did you prefer to think?"

"I don't know that I did prefer it."

"Why did you do it, then?" impatiently. "Why can you not give me a plain answer to a plain question?"

"I will, Hester; a very plain one, if you like to put the question."

"Pooh!" said she, alarmed at once. "After all, I have nothing to say. I have no one to fight with, now that Bertie is away; and I get cross, you see. But you were wrong not to do as I told you—you missed something good—for I read them both afterwards; and after all, you were only idling away your time, and pretending to think as an excuse."

He turned away disappointed: a moment before, her impatience, her irritation had brought her close to him; all at once he knew he must beware. He sighed, and the sigh caught her ear. She looked at him, looked at the floor, stole a glance back, and set to wonder what all this meant.

"You need not have been rude to him," said a voice within. "He was in nowise to blame in this instance. He had done you no wrong that you should treat him so. Go forward and say something pleasant, to show him that you can behave properly."

But the prompter spoke too late. Before she could make up her mind the opportunity was gone.

On the next meeting Hester was anxiously polite, would hardly suffer him to take the trouble of putting her on her horse, made a great point of shaking hands instead of nodding her "good-bye" when mounted, and left him less satisfied than ever. He left Lutteridge for all the summer months; and Wancote also was deserted until the shooting season once more collected its inmates. From year to year, as regularly as the 1st of September came round, Sir John was there to hail the happy day. He did not much care, he said, what they did with him from April to August; he liked, to be sure, his fishing-run in the spring, but he did not mind so much about the later rivers. He could manage with only a touch at the Spey in July, and a dabble at the Wye in June; provided he had those, he really did not care very much what became of him for the rest of the time. They might take him where they chose, so long as it was not to London, nor to Brighton, nor to any of those vile foreign places. Nor, still more emphatically, he would subjoin, "to pay visits." Visits would be the death of him.

As it may be perceived that a wide choice was not left, matters usually ended in a brief stay at his Devonshire farm, and the mother and daughters taking a fortnight in town once and again, while he was engaged elsewhere—while he was having one of those touches at the Spey, the Tweed, or the Wye in which he from time to time indulged.

All were well pleased to find themselves once more at Wancote after a summer broken up into small pieces of pleasure, especially as several promising plans had been frustrated, and the weather throughout the season had been unsettled. "Dear old Wancote!" cried Hester, dancing along the wainscoted rooms. "Dear old dining-room! Dear old library! Dear old windows and doors, and tables and chairs!—I love you all. How the dew glitters on the grass, and the sun sparkles through the laurel leaves! There is the sheep-bell coming up the slope, and the herd-boy's call in answer! There is the river, guarded by my sentinel poplars! There is Lutteridge,—no, it has not yet begun to peep out, because the leaves are so thick this rainy year! Constance is not yet come down, but Simon will be there directly. I shall like to see him, I shall be glad to see him again. We shall meet in the lanes, and I shall find him in the house when we come in from our walks and rides. Sometimes he will stay dinner, sometimes we shall be asked there. It will all be pleasant, it will all be delightful; and I am never going to be stupid, and childish, and melodramatic again."

All the family thought Hester improved. Jane's marriage, they said, had drawn her forward, given her a position, a responsibility, which had been beneficial. She was more thoughtful, milder, less abrupt and headstrong than she had been. She was also prettier.

At least so thought her cousin, when, a few days after the arrival of the Wancote people, he too came down, and accidentally met Hester in her pony-cart, driving along the road to the station. He stopped her to inquire for them all. "And how are you?" he said; "and how is my aunt? What sport has Sir John been having in the North? Were the rivers in trim?"

He thought he had quite got over his *penchant* for the little minx who had stolen his fancy and spoilt his first year at home. He was more occupied now with his shooting friends, his battues, and the bag he expected to make on the 1st, than with anything else. At the particular moment of meeting, his mind was full of the non-arrival of some fresh stores of cartridges which he had meant to find at the station, but which were not there. As soon as all preliminary civilities had been answered, "Are you going to the station?" was inquired eagerly.

"Yes; I am on my way there."

"It is going to rain, and I want to have my cartridges safe out of the damp. Would you mind bringing them up if they have come by the train that is arriving now, and dropping them at Lutteridge on your way back? If you would——"

"Yes, I will; I can bring them up immediately,—I am going nowhere else."

"That's capital; thank you. Dick," stepping back to direct the groom, "you tell Jobson that you met me, and have my authority to take them, or he won't give them up. I told him I would come again myself; so unless you say that, he will not know what to do. And mind you put them safe under cover; put them well under the seat. I'm not going home yet, but tell Kean to take them to the gun-room. I am really much obliged, Hester," turning to her again. "It will save me a lot of bother, for I was on my way up to the house now to order the dog-cart, and I have to be at Parker's by five o'clock. I hardly knew how to manage it."

"Shall I find Constance at Lutteridge? I suppose not."

"No, not yet. She will not be down for another month. She has got some more lively houses to go to for the present. Are the boys to be here to-night?"

"Jem is; Bertie cannot get away."

"I shall be up to-morrow or next day. What a pity about Bertie! Mind you tell Jem; I shall expect him to give us a day soon, but I shall see him myself about it. Good-bye."

She was off as he spoke, and off while he could ruminate on his part of the interview with complacency.

"Well, I have seen her, and that is over; now I have no longer any objection to going to Wancote. She is just as pretty as ever—prettier; as attractive every way; but I have got over it somehow. A few months make all the difference; new scenes, new people, a good change works wonders with us all. Now if my cartridges get wet——"

His mind was kept more to his cartridges than perhaps might have been the case had it been left to itself. He was not going to think about Hester. She was nothing to him—nothing: he wished that she and Jem had not voices so much alike, that was all; he was sure to be startled every now and then by oddly-timed associations, inopportune reminders. However, so far it was delightful to find that the real voice had been heard so calmly, that he had been able to look in her face, take her hand, and take himself off afterwards, with a gallant, light-hearted bearing such as must have done him credit. To Wancote he would go the very next day and show his metal.

It was a pity he did. He did not find his nerve there quite so steady as he had expected; sundry uneasy qualms made him restless, and he was glad to have an excuse for leaving soon.

"What a different person Simon is sometimes to what he is at others!" exclaimed his aunt, as soon as he had gone. "He is generally silent, but to-day he talked more than any one. He used to come and stand by the fireplace, looking round on us all with his great absent eyes, till I have felt quite uncomfortable, and longed for him to move, or speak, or do anything—to-day I absolutely caught myself wishing that he would not fidget! It was so unlike him; could anything have been the matter? But perhaps he was only impatient to be off."

"You see, mamma, it is the 'First,' and he had only run up, he said, in the middle of the sport, leaving his friends waiting at the boat-house. I think it was very kind of him to come at all," said Agatha. "I am sure neither of our boys would have gone in to see Constance if they had been shooting at Lutteridge."

"But still, since he had come, I thought he might have stayed."

She was alone in her opinion; her daughters maintained that all cousinly, relationly feeling had been shown, and were even flattered by his not having more time at his bestowal. When their father came in at night, he too was on their side. "Simon, here?" he said. "I wish I had known he was coming, and I would have left a message for him, but I never dreamed of his coming to-day. I understood he had gone out with a party."

It was explained. "Did you give him luncheon?" next inquired Sir John.

"He would not stay." Lady Manners still half resented the abrupt departure. "He was not with us a quarter of an hour, and seemed all the time in a hurry. He would have nothing but a glass of wine and a biscuit, standing. I thought he might just have sat down; we had a nice luncheon all on the table."

"Pooh! What did he care? They would have luncheon with them, of course. I suppose he left them while they were at it. I wonder he came at all. It must have taken him fully half an hour all in all."

"Not more, I should say."

"Well, what would you have? Half an hour in the middle of the day is as much as an hour in the evening; I would not give up a good half hour at two o'clock for a great deal. And on a day like this when the birds were rising gloriously!—You may take it as a compliment, I can tell you."

"We told mamma so," said Agatha.

"What was their bag?"

"What was it, Hester?"

"Thirty-five brace."

"Only thirty-five! And that will have been the best half; the birds were not doing so well this afternoon: they ought to have had double the number. How many guns?"

"I don't know, papa."

"Who expected you to know, Agatha? I don't suppose you could tell how many we were ourselves! Hetty, say."

"Two, papa; besides Simon. A Colonel Bevan, and another man whose name we did not hear."

"Not Parker?"

"No."

"Parker would be out on his own ground," mused Sir John. "There were three of them altogether, then? Humph! Quite enough for thirty-five brace! Jem and I would have had double the number off the same ground. I don't suppose there was a shot among them."

"Is Simon not a good shot?" inquired Lady Manners. "He seems very fond of it."

"You can't call him good if you mean to compare him with crack sportsmen. He is a fair shot—only fair. He is not bad, you know: he is a long way better than Parker, or Martin, or any of the Westmacotts; but if you want to know exactly how he stands" (none of them cared two straws), "why, then, I'll tell you," continued Sir John, confidentially. "Bertie, or Jem, or I could beat him hollow,—and that's the long and the short of it."

Colonel Lutteridge was not seen much of for a week or two; but looking in one afternoon, after seeing a party off by the train, he found his aunt alone, and sat with her for upwards of an hour. She discovered that he was out of spirits, that he was silent as he had been of old, and that there was no fidgeting. She further found that he was going home to three days of solitude, since his next relay of guests was not expected to arrive until the end of the week; and since the prospect seemed unwelcome to him, her pity and her hospitality were alike enlisted on his side. Go and stay there all by himself! He must not do that. He must send for his portmanteau and his man, and remain where he was. When Agatha and Hester came in from their walk they found the matter settled.

Was it a wise step? He could not tell—he did not wish to know; he told himself impatiently that such questions were better left unanswered. It did not do to probe every passing thought, every mere sensation. It was arrant folly to be thinking and brooding over this thing and that thing, whether he ought to go here and there, whether it was for his own happiness to do this and that. It was dignifying a trifle into a matter of importance—a bad habit. At least, come what might, he harmed no one but himself; and if there were imprudence, he alone would suffer.

Having thus decided, he put aside the question; and, to all appearance, everything went on well enough. Hester certainly was less conscious, less sensitive, than she had been; he was talked to freely, permitted once more to draw near to her especial corner. He found her with Jem in the gun-room one day; it was wet, and Jem was casting bullets. "Now, don't you go," said he to his sister, as Simon came in. "It's only Simon. Come in, Simon—and, I say, will you shut the door quickly, please; the draught blows the fire up so. She thought it was those fellows we are expecting for the afternoon. But I tell you, Het, they won't come in here: of course they will have to go to the drawing-room first. I was mortally afraid it was some one coming to call me, though, when I heard your voice outside," to his cousin; "I thought they might have arrived by an earlier train, and I have only done about the half."

"Is Hester helping?"

"She thinks she is, but she is just sitting there talking rubbish. Here, Hester, give Simon that good chair, and you take this."

The good chair was a worn, shapeless block of high altitude and huge dimensions; that which Jem unceremoniously pushed towards his sister was a rocker with both arms gone and a cushion in rags. She rose to take it.

"I might not have wondered at Bertie," said Simon, reproachfully, "but I did not expect that of Jem!"

"Why, she does not mind," said Jem. "Do you, Hetty? She likes that one. Oh, get out!" as the rocker caught his foot and pinched it. "Oh, I say! It is not meant for people like you to sit in. Let Hetty have it; the one she was in, was too big for her."

She was now standing. "No indeed," said Simon, resolutely. "Hester, if you continue to stand while I sit, I must either stand too or go away."

"Well, stand too." He looked surprised, but did so. Quick as thought she slipped into the seat behind him. "Now then! Oho! oho!" Such a roguish face laughed up to his, that, as he turned to reproach her, he stood mute, bewitched, and forgetful. He gazed for so long that Jem, who had approved of the trick, turned round from his pot to see what was the new hitch. Simon would have given something to have had him away at the moment,—a new courage thrilled through his veins, a new hope took his heart by storm. He spent the next half-hour awaiting with ever-increasing expectation the summons which should leave him alone with his love; but even when the bullet-maker himself had leisure to feel that the call would not be unwelcome, it did not come.

Once he went out to discover if by any chance his friends had arrived, and he had not been told; but such was not the case, and he was back in the gun-room before anything remarkable had taken place in his absence. Then Agatha came in to find where they all were, and finally the whole party was sent for to the drawing-room.

Simon, however, had come to a resolution. The three days, of which this was the last, had not been without result: he was by no means so sure as he had been that he had sifted out the truth, and he was more deeply in love than ever. He had dim suspicions of something going on which was not manifest, of secret workings of the soul, such as he would fain have pried into; and ashamed of his former irresolution, he resolved to have it out now with his sweetheart, whatever the end might be.

Some feeling prompted him to try once more a meeting on the riverside path. Since the friends who were to be with him on Saturday, and for whose coming he had returned to Lutteridge, wrote putting him off till Monday, he would have the Sunday afternoon to himself, and he scarcely regretted that he had not stayed at Wancote. At Wancote, within the Wancote grounds, he would most certainly spend one part of the day.

The morning was wet, and none of the ladies from the Hall were in church; but the heavy clouds cleared off in admirable time, Simon reckoned, for Hester to go to her Sunday class. He had ascertained that she kept up the practice. When she told him so, both had spoken with a certain consciousness, which he felt might mean anything or nothing, might be for the best or worst. Well, he would hope for the best; he would not let himself again be put off by discouraging doubts; he would be there, he would know his fate, and if need be, meet it like a man.

It seemed like a curious dream when he once again chained his boat to the bank and sprang ashore. He had now to wait much about the same length of time as he had done before; and as he stood still, recalling the scene, living almost more in the past than in the present, she stepped into view and made the bygone picture complete.

Either she did not see him so soon as she had done before, or she was not averse to the meeting. There was no hesitation this time,—the light figure clad in its sober tints, holding a parasol as shade from the sun, which shone straight into her eyes, came swiftly on. She was close to him now: how was it, there was something amiss—no, surely not; still was it not a taller, more erect form? The parasol was moved aside, and disclosed the face of—Agatha.

Jacob, cheated of his Rachel, would have felt for Simon then. He understood now the steady front which had been presented to him; the quick, unwavering footstep. He was nothing to Agatha; hastening homewards, as she was now doing, she would scarcely care to be detained by him, would be reluctant to spare time even for a few minutes' interview. And he had augured so much from that onward movement! In the two minutes in which he had had time to mark it, he had conjured up a thousand hopes; he had already in imagination stopped her, persuaded her to retrace her steps, opened his mission. And now, his house of cards lay in ruins before him!

In the blank disappointment of the moment a faint "Agatha" escaped his lips, and the inflection of his voice might have conveyed to an attentive ear the feeling which inspired it. But Agatha only heard her name uttered in tremulous accents, and saw a troubled countenance turned upon her. Was she to blame if she misinterpreted? Had not Constance, Lady Westmacott, Edward Searle, and a host of others thought more of less? He had, or so she thought, been put down as her admirer all over the county.

She had never been herself sure of his deserving the title, but she had always felt that it might be so; although his frequent visits, his evident liking to Wancote, and the conviction that there was no one else, was pretty much all that she could see in favour of the idea.

On the other hand, there were no obstacles; had he any wish to enter the Manners' family, he must know that he might; since the question of marriage between cousins had long before been settled in general terms by him and Sir John. Both were of one mind; it was not unadvisable unless under exceptional circumstances. Colonel Lutteridge had naturally been the one to introduce the subject; and Sir John, in reporting afterwards what had been said, had alleged that his nephew had seemed so settled in his convictions, so desperately in earnest, and to have given so much thought to the matter, that had he ever shown a liking for any of the girls, he should have suspected him of having a personal interest in it. Since he had not shown the liking, the subject had dropped, and whether Agatha had ever expected anything to come of the conversation or not—she had heard of it, of course—did not appear. She was the last girl to have shown her hopes or feelings; she admired her cousin, she liked him, she was perpetually struck by his person and his air. To sit by him, and be occasionally addressed, to make sure that no one else had more of his attention than she had, was a gratification, and it sufficed her. She did not call for much of his notice, although she could not endure to see any of it bestowed on another.

This was the state of Agatha's heart. If, however, he now desired, though late, to kindle these moderate and unexceptionable feelings into a holy flame, she was not unwilling. She caught his "Agatha," and almost thought he was. Even her well-ordered pulses beat a shade faster. His manner, his exclamation of her name, his uncertain movement forward, favoured the illusion, and once implanted, all he did conspired to heighten it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

INTERRUPTED.

"Broken ends will never meet."

"AGATHA," he faltered, "I—I did not expect to see *you*."

She felt that such being the case, he stood in need of reassurance, and replied, cheerfully, "You did not know we taught in the Sunday-school? Hester does at least — my scholars come to me;—but as she has a little cold to-day, I have taken hers, and she has mine at home."

"A cold?" he said, quickly. "Nothing much —nothing serious, I hope?"

"Nothing beyond an ordinary cold; not even a sore throat. But she ought to keep to the house for a day or two."

How very unfortunate! Since it was no

more than this, not an illness to be in any way alarmed about, he had leisure to feel—how very unfortunate. He was more embarrassed than ever; and observing his silence, his discomposure, his evident desire to speak, and his equally evident uncertainty as to what he had to say, she continued, in as disengaged a manner as could be expected from a young lady under such peculiar circumstances, "You were taking a quiet walk along the river, I suppose. Did you cross at the boat-house?"

"Did I? Ah—yes. My boat is down there."

"Do you come often?"

"No. I don't think so."

Don't think so? A man must know whether he does a thing or does not; it was scarcely a question of thinking—but Agatha forgave him. She would have been glad, however, if, instead of remaining before her in that irresolute attitude, he would have taken the initiative in some way; she could hardly linger longer, unless he specifically invited her, for Agatha was the last person in the world to bate one inch of her dignity. At the same time, it was so easy to be seen that he was but looking about for an excuse to detain his companion, that she would not hurry him too much.

"Are you going in at once?" said he, at last.

"I was on my way home," circumspectly.

"Are you in haste? Are you obliged to be at home by a set time?"

"Oh dear, no."

"Hester gave me to understand once that she had not a single second to spare," he observed, with a half smile. "I came across her in this path one Sunday last autumn, and she would not stop to draw a breath. I was afraid you too might think me—ah—in the way?"

Then he looked at her hard. He was so friendless, so entirely thrown back upon himself and upon his own judgment in the matter, that he yearned for a word of counsel—for a sisterly whisper of encouragement. By making a clean shrift to Agatha, confiding in her all his troubles and perplexities, he might gain a valuable ally, and in any case he could lose nothing. Were her opinion to prove unfavourable, he need only retrace his ground a few paces, and recommence his wooing; he had no intentions now of giving in, whoever might recommend him to do so; but if, on the contrary, she breathed a word of hope, it would be life to him. To go home in the state of wrought-up expectation in which he now was, and have to wait days before he could look for any change—before he could advance his cause a step! The thought was intolerable. He turned two anxious, inquiring eyes upon his cousin's face.

It was a kinder face—a softer, gentler face than he had been used to think it. There was a hesitation, even a scarcely perceptible flutter; he felt that she was not eager to be gone, at least, that she was not impatient of his detaining her. Suppose she had a suspicion of his reasons for doing so; suppose she knew all about it? Girls, he believed, did at times seem possessed of a spirit of divination on this subject. She and Hester had been much together of late—Jane's loss had drawn them more into harmony—and even though no words might have passed between the two, it was quite likely that she had discerned both her sister's feelings and his own.

If so, this intuition might possibly be at the root of her confusion, and her readiness to hearken to him; she might be anticipating, even while standing there by his side, his confession. She had at least done all she could:

she had shown her sympathy; it remained for him to claim it. He ground himself up to the point. "Can you turn round with me, Agatha?"

Silently she turned.

"I don't know how to begin," said her cousin, with an embarrassed laugh. "I am not up to this sort of thing. You see I have no one but Constance, and she is not here, and even if she were — you won't mind my speaking to you, Agatha? I am not too forward, am I? You see it is so difficult for a fellow, because of your being relations. You are all so kind to me that it makes it awfully hard to know what you really feel — much worse than if I were a stranger, don't you understand?"

The lucid explanation made an admirable beginning. Agatha bent her head, and felt a little tremble in her veins. It cannot be said that she was wildly shaken, but she did experience a certain amount of nervous feeling, and rather wished it was over.

"I have tried many times," continued Simon, going on with spirit now that he had begun, "to be sure that I was not deceiving myself, but I am still as far from finding out as ever. If there were any one else—if I had a rival——"

"Oh no."

"No?" cried he, eagerly. "Well that is something; but still that does not do much for me, after all. It only helps me half-way, eh, Agatha? I cannot be content; I cannot wait in uncertainty any longer. If I do not know something one way or other at once, I shall be very miserable. How can I help it? I am no boy to fall in and out of love every month or two; this is to me a very great matter," slowly, "and—and—I am a fool!" he broke off, in a rough, harsh voice, which could not veil the emotion with which the words were uttered.

A few more paces were trodden, and then, "You are very good to let me tell you this," continued the speaker, with another disturbed and anxious look into his companion's face. "I feel as if I were encroaching—as if I had no right to trouble you—but I must brave it. Are you sure that you can have patience, Agatha? —That you will not mind listening——?"

She was scarcely conscious of the strangeness of such expressions—did not indeed ascertain with any accuracy what he said—was only aware that he was agitated and incoherent, that he was addressing her as he had never done before, and that he was avowing feelings as to whose depth and reality there could be no two opinions. She was willing, indeed, to listen—far more ready to listen than to speak — and, glad to find that she was not called upon for an immediate answer, walked along by his side with tolerable composure. They had traversed the distance between the place of their meeting and the entrance-gate ere he had paused ; and at the moment when Agatha's faintly articulated assent—her " yes " to his inquiry as to whether she would hear him—reached his ears, to the unspeakable disgust of both, out stepped the lady's father from the lodge.

The chagrin manifest on both countenances ought to have told its own tale to any intruder ; but Sir John was, as we have said, unobservant. He hailed his nephew with a " Ha, Simon, was it you who left the gate open ? " and planted himself between the two without waiting for a reply.

"Just when I had got so far," inwardly sighed the one. And "Just when he had got so far," sympathetically grieved the other.

" Went in to tell 'em to lock the gates," continued Sir John. "I don't know what they were about to have the gates unlocked on a Sunday. We shall have all the rabble about the place coming in next."

"I am afraid it was my doing," said Agatha. "I made Munday unlock the gate for me, and told him to leave it open."

"You should have given notice when you came back, then."

Both now had to listen, or appear to listen, while the new-comer, pleased to find an audience, peacefully discoursed upon the morning's sermon—a favourite theme with him—suiting his step to theirs. Ere long they came to the boat, half concealed under the boughs of an overhanging tree, and Sir John made a halt. He continued talking, it is true; but as he did so, he unconsciously eyed the boat, until, under the look of involuntary expectation, his nephew felt himself obliged to unfasten its moorings. There was clearly no help for it; and with a muttered apology for he knew not what, and a warm pressure of the hand timidly held out to him by his cousin, he stepped in. He had been baulked, but his blood was up. He was not going to lie quietly down under this; he would not be turned from his purpose because of a mere accidental encounter. Agatha, to be sure, he would not assail a second time; but he saw that she had been to the full as much annoyed at the interruption as he had; and when the truth came out, as come out it should on that very night, she would understand all that he had been prevented from disclosing to her. As soon as he got home he rang the bell.

"John, are any of you going to church to-night?"

"Yes, sir; I think several of them is going, sir. They were not at church in the morning."

"I have a note to be left at the Hall. You go through the grounds, I suppose? I will ring when it is ready. It can be left as you go, and you can call for an answer as you return. Sir John does not go at night, does he?"

"No, sir; nor the ladies, except in summer."

"That will do," said Simon to himself, his pulses throbbing with excitement; and he sat down to write.

What he said we shall see hereafter. It was not an easy task, and he was in no fit state to write at all. He had to be plain, yet to pick his words. He wished to be particularly deferential, since he could not help knowing that the offer he was about to make was a brilliant one: but even such an attitude might be overstrained; he must be honest as well as modest. Yet, after all, his real difficulty lay with Hester herself — lay in his desire not to assume that he had a place in her heart, whereas he might be found to have none. His anxiety on this point was great. The pains she had taken from time to time to throw him back, to show him her indifference, recurred to him now like so many imps come to torment. Suppose he had read her aright at first — suppose she had only ceased to fence with him when she had considered he had learnt his lesson! That she had of late given some encouragement to brighter hopes was nothing, — they might prove to have been groundless, founded on quicksands. And then if he should have been found arrogating to himself an interest which she had endeavoured so strenuously to teach him was not there, would he not bring trouble on the child? He was going to do what he had set himself to do, nevertheless. We have said that he was a man with a will of his own; and in spite of all his doubts and fears, he would not shirk at the last, especially now that Agatha was half in the secret already,—but his inner misgivings rendered the letter more humble and touching than surely such an one from such a suitor had ever been before.

There was even a ring of sad anticipation in it, which brought the tears to Lady Manners's eyes.

"Write kindly, very kindly back," she repeated again and again. "Say as much as ever you can, my dear. Tell him how glad we all are — every one. Give him my love. Be sure you put him out of suspense as well as you can; do not let him have another night of uncertainty—there can be no harm in a *hint* at least."

"It was certainly a surprise," continued she, after a while. "Herbert was not more sudden. I am rather sorry in one way. Every one has always been so positive that it would be so, that I could not help taking a little pride in showing that they were wrong. I confess that I did like them to see him coming here, week after week, and month after month, with no sign of their prophecy being fulfilled. That little Mrs Martin was always prying about; and even Constance was inquisitive—very inquisitive—for some time. I did not choose to take any notice. I was resolved to treat him exactly as if not a word were being said. But this is the only provoking part of the matter: they will all be so triumphant."

"Constance won't be triumphant, you may take your oath on that. It will be the death-knell to her hopes of Lutteridge, as well as the signal for her turning out forthwith."

"I do hope she will not think we have furthered it."

"Furthered it! I never was more taken aback in my life. I thought him the last man to be thinking about marrying; I imagined he had had enough of it. To be sure he could not have done better."

Pause. Then, "Well, and we could not have done better, eh, Emily? So we are all satisfied. You will have one daughter settled near you for life, at all events."

"Jane will be surprised."

"Is it to-morrow that Jane comes? You will have something to tell her, then: make her guess what it is. Well, we shall have another winter wedding, I suppose; but mind you, no Cotterills at it this time!"

"Not Jane and Herbert?"

"Pooh! Of course I did not mean them. I was thinking of that faddy old fellow and his wife—I would not have them here again for a great deal. No, we need have nothing of that sort, that's one comfort; Simon has no fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters to bother us. It must be just a quiet wedding, with a few old neighbours, who will all go away again at night, eh, Emily? There will be no use in filling the house as we had to do for Jane."

"You cannot exclude your own relations, and mine."

"They would not care to come; I'll lay anything they would rather not be asked. It would be only insulting them to ask them to take another long railway journey in the dead of winter—mind I won't have it before;—it must either be in December or January——"

"Some time when you hope the weather will be bad," said she, slily.

"Well, it generally is bad about that time; we can't help that. Of course we are not going to have a marriage arranged to suit their convenience—they can come or not, as they please: if they come, well and good; if they like to stay away, it is their own doing. You don't fix your daughter's wedding with a view to the weather; the weather must take its chance. You might ask them to come if it is fine, eh?"

She could not but laugh.

"Eh?" repeated he. "Well, we need not settle it to-night. Bertie will want to be at home, and he is about the only one you need think about. Where are the girls? Where has Hetty been all the evening?"

"In bed, poor child. Her cold seemed worse, so I thought she had better go up-stairs and nurse it."

"She has not heard, then?"

"No."

But as the above conversation had not referred to her, although the reader may have presumed it did, her hearing or not hearing was, the parents felt, of no importance.

The note had not arrived so soon as its writer had intended, since, finding that they were late for church, the servants had taken the matter into their own hands, and had resolved that John should both deliver it and wait an answer on their return, instead of giving the time for that answer to be considered which Simon had intended. They thought he would never find out, nor indeed did he. Therefore it was that Hester had gone to bed before John arrived, and that her mother being likewise up-stairs, Agatha was alone with her father when the letter was brought in. It was handed to her, Sir John finding the light not strong enough for him to see to read by, without his glasses, which were not about him. "From the Colonel?" said he. "Take it to the window, Agatha, and let us hear what he says."

She hesitated. "Why don't you take it?" reiterated Sir John. "Here."

"It is growing so dark, papa, that really I don't know that I can see. I will light the candles on this table for you."

No, he would not have the candles; he hated to have candles lit till after the daylight had fairly gone,—till the curtains were drawn and the room could look comfortable. A wretched starveling pair of candles made the whole place dismal.

Afraid of more, she was compelled to yield; but instead of going to the window, which would have obliged her to raise her voice, and make herself heard across the entire breadth of the room, she stirred the fire into a blaze, and kneeling on the hearthrug, read much what she had expected to read. The writer hoped that he was not presuming too much in desiring to form a closer relationship. He had for a very long time—almost from his first coming home—felt such a wish. He had been exceedingly uncertain as to his feelings being returned, and he wished to have it expressly understood that if he had been mistaken in supposing his cousin to be not unfavourable to him, the blame was his own. "I tried to speak to Agatha this afternoon," continued Simon, "but I had not been able to bring out what I wished to say before you joined us. Give her my love, and ask her to forgive my having troubled her, especially as I had to leave without offering any sort of explanation."

So illegible was the penmanship, and so blurred and blotted the paper, in the evident haste or trepidation of the writer, that Agatha had some excuse for the halts she made in its perusal. All was at last, however, made out, and to her father's astonishment, she allowed that the confession was neither unlooked-for nor unwelcome.

"She took it as coolly as possible," said he, afterwards. "That Agatha is a tough customer sometimes. I could not have believed it if I had not seen her with my own eyes."

But to Simon he spoke of her differently, as was natural.

When the letter had been delivered to the Lutteridge embassy, Simon sank back with a sigh of relief. At least the thing was done. He had done it badly, of course: the writing was execrable, and the ink would not blot—moreover, he had had to cut out one-half that had been written in his first copy, because his pen tormented him, and the servants were waiting. He almost wished, on thinking it over, that he had sent the first scrawl: it was, in spite of the smear across the second page, a better production on the whole than the last. He laughed nervously when he thought of that great bar of ink which had caused him such a moment of despair, and reflected that if all came right in the end, he would tell Hetty some day how nearly he had been put off making his offer because of it. John had come in for the third time at the moment when his master was regarding his work in dismay, and had looked at him, and gone out again.

Simon had set his teeth, seized another sheet, and dashed off such of the substance of his first draft as he thought to the purpose, omitting all the rest. He had not stopped to read it over, dreading to find fresh faults; and there was now no time for further alterations, nor for beginning anew. He himself knew so well what he wished to say, and to whom he was referring, that even if he had run his eye over the sheet a second time, it might not have occurred to him to discover that he had never once named Hester's name. He had called her "my cousin," finding the phrase more congenial to his feelings at the opening, and had, in his first attempt, gone on to speak of "Hester" on the next page. But the sentence which began with her name was precisely the little outburst of honest love and ardour, which, when time pressed, he had thought might as well be struck out of the second letter, the letter which actually went. From explaining his wishes and feelings with regard to his "cousin," he had gone, by fateful ill-luck, straight to the name of Agatha. He had been anxious to show Agatha that her kindness, her readiness to give him her ear that afternoon, had not been thrown away—that he was grateful for a sympathy which had gone far towards bracing his resolution. Accordingly that part of the letter had been elaborated; while as to Hetty—he had smiled to himself, and thought she might wait to hear her praises from his own lips.

Such being the blunder into which our lover fell, it is not to be wondered at—indeed it was the most natural thing possible—that he should be supposed by all who saw the letter to be alluding to Agatha throughout. Her avowal that she was not altogether taken at unawares confirmed the idea; and since she, without hesitation or affectation, owned her happiness, it was in reference to her having done so that the father and mother talked of future arrangements, and that Lady Manners thought a hint, at least, might be given to put her nephew out of suspense.

Since he had actually begun himself to speak to Agatha, and since she had also been by accident the first to read his letter, "I think," said Lady Manners, "that it would not lessen her dignity to let him know that she knows. It is not generally done; but under these circumstances,—he is so entirely one with us—so thoroughly to be depended on—and expresses himself, besides, with such great—great—such extraordinary humility and uncertainty, and seems so unhappy—almost hopeless——"

"Oh, well," said Sir John, cutting her short, "I'll say anything you like; only don't make me write it twice, for that I won't do. Tell me what I'm to say, and I'll say it."

So well did he say it, that the answer which, with a hand that slightly shook, Simon took from the servant and opened immediately the door was closed, lifted at the first glance half the weight which was lying on his heart. He sprang from his chair, and took it nearer to the lamp. He read with trembling and confused delight, pausing only for that "Thank God!" which will break from the grateful heart at such a moment, and at once made out that his uncle not only gave him free permission to enter, but a cordial welcome, into his family. So much was on the first page. The other began with, "Agatha is the least surprised of any of us" —the reader smiled; "she had to know, as I called on her to read your note to me, when it came in. But you won't mind. I don't know if I ought to say as much, but I may tell you *in your ear* that you have nothing to be afraid of."

Nothing to be afraid of! This must be Agatha's doing; she must have been the one to suggest the kind word of hope, recollecting all he had said in the afternoon. Sir John of himself could not have spoken so confidently, and Simon's heart warmed to Agatha. "We are all pleased," continued the worthy gentleman, who plumed himself for long afterwards on the handsome style of his epistle; "Agatha will make you the best of wives——"

"Agatha!" laughed Simon. "No, not Agatha, thank you."

What an odd mistake! His uncle must have been as much perturbed in writing as he had himself been. To think of having Agatha relegated to him as a wife! How such a slip would have annoyed Miss Manners.

As he proceeded, however, it appeared that the error was carried on. There was some inextricable confusion apparently in the mind of good Sir John. "Agatha" was not only named, but his "eldest daughter" was referred to. He spoke of the loss his eldest daughter would be to them all. What could the phrase mean? His uncle must have been half asleep.

His "eldest daughter," and the observation that she "had always been her mother's right hand,"—that certainly could be none other than Agatha, but why spoken with any reference to him? It was a delusion—some extraordinary jumble of ideas which had got into juxtaposition by mistake. He rubbed his eyes to be sure that he was not dreaming, turned the page backwards, and read over the whole carefully. "Agatha will make you the best of wives. We shall all feel her loss, for she has been more than merely an eldest daughter to us—she has been her mother's right hand." But what was this to *him?* He had a stupified consciousness of something amiss—of some horrible unfathomable misconception; but it had not yet perforated his brain.

Mechanically he turned to the envelope to see if there was any explanation there—anything further concealed in its folds. There was.

A strip of paper, directed in his aunt's fair flowing hand, thrilled comfort to his heart.

"This will make it right," he murmured, as with nerveless fingers he undid the twisted packet, his eyes staring with excitement, agitation, and terror. Alas! the terror was but too well founded; the next minute his head fell forward upon his hands, and he sank down upon a seat, dumb with an anguish that could find no outlet.

PART VII.

CHAPTER XXV.

"I HAVE LOST ALL BUT MY HONOUR!"

> "A noble nature may catch a wrench."
>
> —*Timon of Athens.*

> "Bad events peep out o' the tail of good purposes."
>
> —*Bartholomew Fair.*

The few words which had smitten their reader so hardly ran as follows: "We are all happy in dear Agatha's happiness, and no one will be better pleased than your little favourite, who has gone off for the night, but will be told by-and-by. We shall expect you to-morrow."

The clock ticked loudly in the silent chamber, as Simon sat hour after hour motionless, stupified by the extremity of his suffering.

Physical extremity of pain, it is known, results not unfrequently in this state of torpor; and when the mind likewise has borne as much as it can bear for the moment, the severity of the blow acts like a narcotic. From time to time he slightly shivered, drew himself together, and tried to think. What had happened? What had taken place to make him feel so strangely? Had some one struck him a heavy stroke? Had he been ill, and wandering in his imagination? What was it? What was he about?

At clearer moments he attempted to go over all that had passed between him and Agatha—thought he could recollect returning home without accomplishing that which he had intended, but still without this blinding mist over all around which had come on since. When had it begun? He tried to consider, to understand something of the accursed business, but broke off confused and bewildered; he could not even be certain whether it was his own doing or the work of some other hand. Not all at once could the depth of the gulf into which he had plunged be fathomed; it came by gradual development, each new thought darting its freshly agonising sting, each half hour bringing to light some as yet unthought-of and hideous reflection.

Hester not his, and he Agatha's! Hester withdrawn from him, and Agatha offered to him! Agatha to be his bride, and Hester his—sister!

At the intolerable, the monstrous vision, he rose at last, goaded to motion. It could not—should not be; it was against reason, right, sense, prudence, law, and justice, that a thing so unnatural should take place. Had he been merely refused by the one sister, he had been prepared for such a blow; but this mockery of happiness and welcome—this assurance that she, his one love, the desire of his eyes, would rejoice to see him take another to his bosom, was beyond what he was able to bear.

What were his petty anxieties of the afternoon compared with this? They were swallowed up—lost—in this great woe.

He looked back a few hours, and felt that he had then been easy, happy, confident; his unreasoning instinct suggested that he should return to a purgatory so preferable to the hell which now engulfed him. And why not? Why should he not? Too late? It was not too late—it was never too late. He was not yet bound; he had but to confess his wretched blunder and be free.

But what then? Would not every member of the family he loved so well curse him in their hearts? Would he not have brought shame and grief on each one, and mortification unspeakable—perchance more—to the breast of a pure-minded blameless girl, who had in nowise deserved it at his hands? Having believed herself sought by him, she had trustfully and unreservedly yielded her heart, and to have it now made public that she had done so too soon would, with the laceration of every softer feeling, unite to blight her whole existence for the time.

Oh, why had she read the letter? If it had been kept a secret between him and Sir John, a mistake so palpable might have been rectified ere it had been exposed. Hester, indeed, might still have been unwon, but that was now almost a secondary idea; he could have borne in silence, perhaps have gone away to bear in solitude that trial. It would have been bitter, but nothing to this. Now must she be ever before his eyes, if this union takes place! With every after scheme she will be associated; she will be woven into his daily life! He will have to meet her, speak to her, take her hand as a near relation should. At times she will be intrusted to his charge as a younger sister might. She will stay at his home; he will hear her step in the doorway, her voice by his fireside; and finally, will come perhaps another wedding, and another bride! Oh, Hester, Hester!

His shuddering figure leaned against the mantelpiece in the interval of numb unthinking silence which followed. He woke up again; it was one o'clock. Four hours had passed since the letter had been brought to him. He remembered that, just before the handle of the door turned, he had glanced at the clock, and thought impatiently that it was past the hour at which the church-goers generally returned. Usually he went himself to the evening service, and could reckon to within a few minutes on the time he should be at home again. He had given a quarter of an hour for John to have fulfilled his mission, but John, as we have seen, had needed more than that; he had not, however, been questioned; the letter was there—it was enough. As the man left the room, his master noticed that the clock struck nine.

The time had sped unnoted; it was chilly, for the fire had burnt itself out; but he still hung over the fireplace.

No one stirred in the house—the servants having probably gone to bed early, as servants do on Sundays—and no sound but the monotonous moan of the wind among the trees fell upon his ear as the night went on.

He thought it was rather a short night. It did not seem to him half as long as those on which he slept. Wrestling with a misery from which there was no deliverance, great wastes of time passed over him as though they were not.

He was impervious to sensations, insensible to fatigue. Once he thought he would go up-stairs, but the exertion troubled him; he did not know what he had meant to do, and before he had assured himself of his purpose he had forgotten it.

At last, as the grey dawn broke, and its first rays stole through the closed shutters, upon his knees he fell.

. . . . . .

Before the servant came to make ready the room in the morning her master had left it. He would not be surprised by curious eyes, to be the marvel of prating tongues; and in fear lest he might be overheard, stumbled heavily up the staircase, ere any were up.

His face was drawn and grey, his eyes wild. As he hurriedly took off his things beside the dressing-table, he caught his own reflection in the mirror, and paused. "She would hardly know me," he said. "I must not go up wearing such a countenance as this. After all, what is the great thing I am doing? No such unheard-of action. One of us two must bear the brunt, and I have brought it on myself. It would be cowardly, brutal to fix a stigma on an innocent girl. I have lost all but my honour; let me keep that by a paltry sacrifice. Such ease and peace as might have come back to me in time, may well be given up to prevent a great trouble and disturbance from entering that tranquil home. Good old Sir John! He would never hold up his head again before me were the truth to come to light. My aunt, too, has her own share of pride. Agatha would feel the humiliation even more than the sorrow. And Hester—no, my darling, you shall never turn your eyes away in scorn from me—never tell yourself that I was not worthy of you, even had you learned to love me. . . . I must, forsooth, enact the happy bridegroom. Well, I shall. Am I to kiss them all as Cotterill did? No. Luckily for me they did not like it; I might have pressed that little cheek too warmly. She will smile upon me now, no doubt; all her fears and misgivings will be laid at rest from henceforth, and she will be ashamed of them, poor child, now that she learns how groundless they have been. She will take herself out of the way, and leave us together—Agatha and me. My betrothed will not expect any great demonstrations of affection, that is one comfort. I think she will not prove exacting. Every now and then I shall have to bestow a chaste salute, and urge her to hasten the happy day. That, I presume, will be the proper mode of procedure, the sum-total of our *tête-à-têtes*. Cotterill and his beloved used to be absent for hours together in some one of the sitting-rooms, or out in the shrubberies; what on earth could they have found to talk about? Ah, by the by, they will be here to-morrow; another charming scene to go through. I wonder if they too—like all the rest—consider that I shall have the best of wives. . . .

"Hard? Well, perhaps it is hard, twice in one's life to lead a bride to the altar with a careless hand. I did not mind once; it seemed all well enough, since it was made easy and arranged for us, and neither of us had any one else; it was all very well—but *now!* Now, I know. And I have harmed no one, done wrong to no one; but the Almighty has been pleased to take away from me all that made life dear, and to give me in its place ashes for fruit, stones for bread. The Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. But I see no way out of it," said Simon, simply, "so I'll do my best. Come in," as the servant who now entered with hot water stopped short on beholding his master already up. "Come in, and tell them to let me have breakfast soon this morning. I am going out immediately after it."

Allowing himself no time for further reflection, he hastily performed his toilet and descended.

"Let me tell Hester myself," were Lady Manners's last words, as she bade her eldest daughter good-night the evening before.

Surprised at the request, Agatha, while assenting, pondered what it might mean. Was there to be anticipated anything uncomfortable—any feeling on her sister's part which might cast a shadow over the happy occasion? At one time she herself had suspected some such slight girlish fancy, but it was long ago, and all appearance of it had worn away. She was convinced that if her mother imagined anything of the kind to be still lingering in her sister's bosom, she was mistaken.

But, truth to tell, Lady Manners imagined nothing of the sort. She was perfectly sincere in the statement she had made to Simon with regard to Hester, but remembering sundry awkward passages in her youthful daughter's history during the bygone year, which she felt might be likely to trouble Hetty too, at such a time, she resolved to smooth away with gentle touch any pain that might occur with the recollection.

Her severity on one occasion in particular, she had repented of; and though it had been no doubt beneficial, she still felt she should like to make atonement when atonement was possible. The altered demeanour, the weary spiritless look which had been manifest for many weeks afterwards had not been unobserved, and her mother had marked with secret relief a renewal of health and energy in the spring. Then she had seen the summer bring its full fruition of life and cheerfulness, and felt that all was well.

But during the past year she had formed more than one resolution never again to be so impetuous—never to be carried beyond what she had meant to say, by the impulse of the moment. She had even, for she was an excellent woman, acknowledged and felt contrition for a fit of undeniable ill-temper.

She thought she would now like to say a pleasant word to Hester. She fancied that she would tell her of what had taken place, in such a manner that no embittering recollections should embarrass; she would even say jestingly, "We have almost forgotten, Hetty, that you were his first favourite. He was quite naughty in taking so much notice of you, and I had to scold. But you never need a word now, my dear; your behaviour to him, as well as to others, is quite what I should wish."

With much satisfaction she rehearsed this little *douceur*. She knew it must please—knew that such praise would be warmly appreciated—would be the particular meed of approbation calculated to gratify.

And Hester would be her only daughter at home now; long as she had kept her elder ones, both were leaving her within one year.

It was rather hard, but there was much to mitigate the pain of parting. Nothing, to begin with, could be more congenial to every feeling she possessed than to have one of her own family, one who was already half a Lutteridge, mistress of the Manor. She heartily liked her nephew, in spite of his having been now and again in her bad books, and as heartily respected him. She and Sir John had been surprised—although, perhaps, they need not have been—to find their kinsman not only a moral but a religious man. From himself perhaps so much would never have been discovered—on sacred topics his lips were invariably sealed—but actions speak for themselves. His life was enough; it was unostentatious, but consistent.

Again, such a union would hardly separate Agatha from her family at all. Jane's loss had been greatly felt; her going to live in another county, and the prospect of her and her husband's spending much of the year in London, had taken her altogether out of reach, and it had been with unmixed reluctance that Lady Manners had ever contemplated another marriage.

But to this alliance there was no such drawback. When Constance was at Lutteridge she was over twice or thrice every week—Constance who had no special call to come, who merely looked in because she was passing, or because she had an hour to idle away. If she could so come and go, how much oftener might they not expect their own child? A day, or, at most, two, would scarcely pass without a meeting. Simon himself would, she hoped, also continue to drop in and out at odd hours, as was his habit. She had learned to reckon upon his looking in upon them thus, and would have missed his visits had they ceased. She liked to see the tall figure step quietly into the room in the twilight, and as quietly pass out again after a while. Now and then, without any need of invitation, he had appeared for an hour or so in the evening, making an agreeable break; and she felt that she could really add this to the pleasures of the future—that such genial intercourse would not be withdrawn.

Resolved now to look only on the bright side, she found much to cheer; and even the fact that it was not her Hetty, not her dearest treasure of the band, who was about to leave her, added a ray of sunshine to her reflections.

In came Hetty to know why she was wanted.

First to report upon her cold; then to hear that she had gone to bed too soon upon the night before—she had been out of the way when an event had taken place.

"What sort of an event?" asked Hester. Her cousin was not the kind of person with whom she connected an "event," and she cast about in her mind, with a smile on her lips, what such a portentous phrase might mean. Whom could it refer to? Bertie, or Jane? One or other of those two probably, since, had it been connected with any one in the house, she thought she must have heard sooner.

"Jane?" she said, inquiringly.

"No. Jane will have to hear after you."

"Bertie?"

"Wrong again. Guess nearer home."

"Nearer home?" said Hester. "Not anything to do with *me*, mamma?" But all at once her breath came and went quickly, and her heart started at double its usual pace.

"Too far on the near side, Hetty—if that is grammar," said her mother, laughing. "Try once more before you give in."

"I suppose it is Agatha, then," replied Hester, her interest somewhat abated.

But she was curious again immediately. "And what about Agatha? For I see by your face, mamma, that I am right. It *is* Agatha. Who besides? Is it—oh, I know—Edward."

"You are not half as sharp as I expected you to be, little one. Poor Edward! But I never thought that would come to anything."

"It is *poor* Edward, is it? Oho! That is the kind of thing then, at any rate. I am rather glad it is not 'poor Edward,' do you know, mamma, for his is such a very, very old, sleepy, prosaic affair. Now I like something quick, sudden—something new, at least. But, mamma, I cannot think of any one else."

"Can you not? Well, I should not have imagined it was so difficult."

"That Mr Lowther? But no, I don't believe he meant anything, and I am sure Agatha would never look at him either."

"Mr Lowther? I do not even recollect the name!"

"We met him, mamma, at the Harfords; but perhaps you have forgotten."

"And he paid Agatha attention?"

"Oh yes, in a way; the Harfords said he did. But, mamma, who can it be? It is very odd; I cannot think of any one but Mr Lowther."

"Try another L.," suggested Lady Manners.

She passed into her dressing-room as she spoke, and when she came back after a few minutes, she asked, with a smile—

"Well?"

"I have guessed," said Hester. She looked much as usual, but spoke rather low.

"You had not to go so far after all," continued her mother, gaily.

"Oh no; not at all far."

"I knew that you would be pleased," Lady Manners went on, "for Simon was always your great friend. Do you remember papa laughing at your 'Simon and I' on the day you and Jem first walked with him? I made Agatha promise to let me tell the news myself, because there had once been a word or two between you and me about this very cousin of yours, and because I wished to tell my Hetty how glad I have been that I have never had to speak to her on such a subject again. Agatha is the last person ever to remember it, dear."

"Well, mamma, what's all this about?" cried Jem, entering. "Are you not gone down, Hetty? I say! We are all late together. Prayers are in. That downy old Simon—who would have dreamed he was looking after Agatha? I thought he was rather afraid of her, to tell the truth, and got out of her way whenever he could. Are we to go down, mamma, or wait for you?"

"Oh, go down—go down, my dear, and Hester too. I am afraid I must be content to be late; I have been hindered. There is Chigwell only at the door now."

"It was rather odd," mused she, as the maid flitted to and fro; "it was certainly not quite what I had looked for. Can I have been mistaken? Can there have been more than I knew of? If so, my poor Hetty!"

"Where are you off to?" said Jem to his sister, as she turned aside after closing the door. "Are you not coming down?"

"Directly—yes. You go, and I will follow. I am only going along to my room for a moment,—for—ah—I have not got a pocket-handkerchief," diving into her pocket. "Fly, Jem, and I will come when I have fetched it."

"But I shall not need one," said the high-spirited girl to herself, as for one minute's space she stood upright and alone, steadying herself beneath the blow. "I am so glad I am not crying. I am not in the least inclined to cry. I shall go down immediately—this moment. And I shall kiss Agatha, and be kind to her. It is all right, of course it is all right, and I do not really mind it all. Why should I? Now then."

CHAPTER XXVI.

HESTER PLAYS HER PART.

"But O, how bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes!"—*As You Like It.*

It was a glorious gay September morning, and the slopes on either side of the river, silvery with dew, and netted with the webs of busy spiders, had never looked more beautiful. Overhead the rooks cawed and circled in a deep blue sky; small birds were trilling their light-hearted notes, wood-pigeons were cooing in the woods, and the leafy shades on every side were instinct with life and animation.

All the cheerful scene, however, was lost on Simon as he hurried down the bank, on his way to claim his bride; it did not even jar upon him, so absorbed was he in contemplation of the errand on which he was bound. He would not loiter, would not stop to think. Once only he halted—a momentary, involuntary halt; as he crossed the water he lay on his oars for half a minute, while a vivid picture of the boat's crew, coming home through the dusk on that November afternoon, not yet a year since, rose before him. He felt again the little hand in his, watched the downcast face, listened for the low replies—it was but for a passing instant that the moisture gathered in his eyes—he sighed, and pulled on.

They saw him coming from the windows, and though he had been expected early, this was even sooner than Agatha had reckoned on. She was alone with her mother in the morning-room, Sir John and Jem being already off for the day, and Hester having vanished.

"Shall I go, or shall I stay?" cried Lady Manners, nervously.

"Oh, mamma, stay! Receive him here, and then—then you can come—for me." Even Agatha was rather upset; she left the room quickly, and went to her own, where for a short time she waited quietly enough. But by-and-by she found herself unable to be alone; her sister's company would be welcome; to have Hester to talk to at such a moment would calm her own spirits; and accordingly she essayed to open the door between the two apartments, but it was bolted.

"Hester?"

"Yes."

Agatha paused for admission. She, the heroine of the hour, expected her sister to fly and unbar at the sound of her voice.

No sound from within, however, coming to justify this anticipation, after a pause she again turned the handle, this time with an accompaniment of "Hetty, it is I—Agatha. Let me in."

Unwillingly Hester came. Poor child! she too had seen the figure on the slope.

"I want to come in," said Agatha, showing her blushing face all smiles. "Hetty, did you know? He is come."

"Why are you not there?"

"Mamma is with him; I could not have met him all at once. Mamma will come, when he wants me, so I thought I would sit here with you," said Agatha, conscious of favour bestowed.

Hester turned to the window.

"I wish it were over," continued Agatha, with a shy laugh. "You can have no idea how bad it is when it comes to the point! It had gone so far yesterday, that I do wish we had not been interrupted, and then there would not have been this awkwardness to go through to-day. Do you not pity me, Hetty?"

"Very much indeed."

"You hard-hearted child, you don't speak as if you did. You think, I daresay, that it is all pleasant and nice. Now don't you? Do you remember, Hester, how we held our conclave together, you and I, when Jane was summoned to Herbert? Oh dear, I do wish these dreadful summonings were not a part of the business; I am getting quite nervous. There!"

A light rustle at the outer door made both girls start, and perhaps the spasm which shot through the veins of each was something of the same nature, since Agatha's was certainly more akin to pain than pleasure. "Oh dear, I do wish with all my heart it were over," whispered she again, under her breath, as she rose to unfasten the door.

"Well, my love, are you ready?" said Lady Manners, in the studiously cheerful accents with which a surgeon invites his patient to be seated in the chair. "He is in the morning-room. God bless you, my child!"

"Bless me, even me also, O my mother!" None heard that cry—neither, at least, of the two mortals who were by, when it burst forth. It was an inward wail—a sob of agony. It found its only visible vent in a shudder which shook Hester's slender frame from head to foot, but her back was turned, and it might be unperceived. Suddenly she felt a hand upon her brow. "A headache this morning, little one?"

"Yes, mamma."

"I thought so. Don't come down just yet, dear. You have got a fire? That's right. Lie down for an hour, and no one shall disturb you; I have writing to do, and the house is quiet. I am not sure that you ought to be going about at all, with a cold like yours, Hetty; I really did not half expect to see you up to-day."

"It is getting better, mamma."

"Very well; but take care. Stay here till luncheon-time."

"Ought I not to see—him? To say—something? I hope he will not go till I come; it would seem unkind——"

"You will have many opportunities. He will not miss you to-day."

"Oh no, he will not miss me."

"You and Jane will meet him together."

"You speak as if we should mind meeting him, mamma; why should we mind? We see Simon every day, and it will be nothing to—it will make no difference, you know."

"Well, I *don't* know; that is it! I found it made a good deal of difference to me just now. I thought perhaps, love, that you shared the feeling," turning away her head. "So far from making it better, when anything of this sort happens with a relation, it is worse; I should really have preferred an interview with a stranger. Herbert, to be sure, was so easy to get on with, that I did not mind him in the least; he rattled away as if it had been the commonest thing in the world! As of course it is, when one comes to think of it."

"Only things may be very common," said Hester, "that only happen to each, once in a life."

"That is it, no doubt. We have not been in the way of weddings."

"Yes, mamma, and I daresay it was tiresome for you; I think I should have minded meeting Simon a little. But you see," she went on, steadily, "it will not be the same to us; Jane and I will have no speeches to make, unless," looking wistfully into her mother's face, "it is necessary that we should pretend—I mean, say that we are glad, or something of that sort, is it?"

"You did not say so to Herbert?"

"No, we did not know him—at least we hardly knew him; but I thought—I was afraid that perhaps when it was Simon——"

"There is no occasion, my dear. For my part I cannot but consider displays of affection at such a time, in bad taste. Poor little Herbert is such a warm-hearted fellow that it was impossible to repress, or to be vexed with him; but you need not fear any demonstrations on Simon's part, I am sure. Had he been any other of my nephews I should have felt almost obliged to do more than just shake hands with him, but I fancy nothing would have astonished your cousin more. He will suit Agatha exactly," she suddenly began, in the eager tone, which the bright vision of Agatha's future once more prompted. "Simon and Agatha are alike in that," she was running on; but the two names thus brought together, was a shock which was scarce able to be borne without betraying Hester's heart. Her face changed, and all the mother's suspicions were confirmed.

Now was it that she felt that no yearnings of her own must unhinge her child's resolution—now must she support the wavering winglets which were seeking to fly, but were all but failing. Longing to stretch out her arms, she durst not even bestow one word of sympathy; that word would of a surety open the floodgates, and who could say if they would ever close fast again?

She turned in silence and left the room.

If any one else had a sense of something wrong, it was Jem; but to him it was not so much a suspicion as a phantom inkling of an idea which he could make nothing of. He saw the materials for a discovery, but he could not put them together so as to form anything solid. He was puzzled, uncertain, and partially hoodwinked. "And then," he argued, "if there had been anything in it, of course mamma would know."

It did not occur to him that whereas if his mother did know, she might choose to keep her knowledge to herself; he thought she would at least have whispered it, as she did all her other family secrets, to him. "I always thought it had been Hester," he remarked once, hoping for a confidence, and then he did fancy that he caught an uneasy look.

"You know, my dear," Lady Manners said, however, "that I told you once before what I believed to be the case as to that. You see it has been proved to be exactly right."

"You mean after that day on the river? Oh, but that is ages ago. Nobody ever thought much of that, although there was such a fuss made. I was thinking about them just lately. Somehow I had got to fancy they were caring about each other when he was here the other day."

"You did?" said his mother. "Ahem!—Why?"

"Oh, I don't know; I thought so. I was with them a good deal, and I made up my mind that he was coming after Hester."

"Indeed? But I never imagined that he felt for her anything but the sort of—of liking that an older relation—an uncle or brother—has for a pleasant child. He was amused with her playful ways, and he evidently looked upon her as so young that he was warranted in treating her more caressingly than I altogether liked. He has dropped that manner lately, and it is just as well."

"Why," said Jem, "it was that which made me open my eyes. When I saw him begin to treat her ceremoniously, I thought it was time to look for squalls. And besides——"

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing, mamma; only I am sure that he *admires* Hester."

"Very likely. It is a face that any one would like to look on."

"Not in that way. You weren't in the gun-room the other day, or you would have thought the same. And as to her being so very young, she is nearly nineteen."

"No, no, no! She was only eighteen in March. Her birthday was just before Lady Westmacott's ball, do you not remember? But you were not here, to be sure."

"Well, but many a girl is married before she is eighteen. I don't think any one else thinks of Hester in the way you do, mamma. You never gave it a thought that Simon might be taken with her, because you considered her too young! How do you know he was not, at first?"

"My dear, think what you are saying."

"And you fancied he liked Agatha all along?"

"No, indeed; I did not. I fancied nothing of the kind. I could not have been more surprised than I was last night, for I felt with your father that he was not in the least disposed to marry again at all."

"*Again?*" said Jem. "Oh, I had forgotten that. Well," he concluded, doggedly, "*I* thought it was Hester."

Simon desired not to leave to another day any portion of the ordeal now to be gone through; to go away, and wake the next morning with such another walk in store for him would be impossible; and accordingly, although he would not stay luncheon, having an appointment with his steward to overlook some new cottages he was building, and in which he was interested, he promised to come back in the twilight, shake hands with the Cotterills, and bring his own party to call on Sir John. One of them had known Sir John in his youth, and had expressed a desire to renew the acquaintance.

He took his departure, and Agatha was left to the enjoyment of her own thoughts, and the anticipation of Jane's surprise and Herbert's pleasure. Her own position, unexpected as it was—perhaps more unexpected than she cared to own even to herself, than she was indeed aware of—naturally filled her mind, and so youthful and radiant did she look under the stimulus, that in contrasting her appearance with that of her sister, Lady Manners was vexed with herself for the involuntary reflection that Simon's preference was not to be marvelled at. Hester, he might choose to laugh and chatter with, but he would naturally prefer to see his table headed by the belle of the county.

Hester, you see, had not put on a pretty grey dress with a pink ribbon, nor had she corresponding pink tints in her cheeks, nor the light of animation in her eyes. Her eyes were naturally finer than Agatha's,—softer, larger, infinitely more capable of feeling; when gladdened, exalted by any strong emotion, they were lustrous, and shone like stars beneath the long fringes, which formed only half a shade; but their glow obscured, the whole countenance was a blank — there was no regularity of outline, such as saved Agatha from plainness even when looking her worst. But again, there was no harshness — all was soft, inviting: the mouth, Simon always declared, was lovely; and yet such countenances, whose charms lie like that of some landscapes, in the varying lights which fall across them, lose at times the very beauty of shadow. There come days when they are meaningless, vacant, void—masked, as it were, for the nonce.

Agatha thought it was her sister's dress which was unbecoming, and conjured her to change it before the afternoon. Lady Manners put forth the headache. "I think," said Hester, briskly, "you both forget my cold; nobody has asked after my cold to-day, and every one wonders that I look ugly. I am better, and I am not going to be ill, as mamma predicted that I should yesterday, but still I am not to be supposed to be looking as blooming as Agatha, who—who," with a brave smile, "ought to be the queen of the day. Hey, Agatha! It is all very fine for you to put on your nice new gown, but you don't expect me to waste mine, when no one is going to look at me!"

"Oh, for Jane and Herbert, Hetty. Make a change at four o'clock. You can put on a little white shawl, if you are afraid of cold. That pretty thing that came the other day would look nice."

"Do, my dear," added Lady Manners, her heart swelling as she spoke. "My little girl," she proudly thought, "that was well done! And she will see him in the half-light, and among a crowd of people, so it will not be quite so hard upon her. She will escape, at least, observation."

In the midst of the throng the two hands met. Only for an instant — each heart only conscious of its own bitterness, each only tremulous to screen it from the other. The fingers dropped asunder; and after that it fell out quite easily that no farther intercourse took place between Hester and her cousin. Hetty made great fun with Herbert, who was in rampant spirits; and their laughter—his, at least, was so incessant that it attracted some of the other gentlemen to their corner, but naturally it did not take Colonel Lutteridge from the side of his betrothed. She was of Jane's party by the fire, and it would have been a thing unheard of if her cousin, now her lover, had attached himself to the other group. He needed not, of course, to have turned his back on the merry people; still it was but fair that if he chose to do so, on such a day, he should have the privilege. From time to time he stooped over Agatha with a remark, and it was he who took her cup, and carried Jane's dressing-bag to the sofa. Sir John, when he and Jem came in soon afterwards, found him in close attendance; and he had two beaming countenances to encounter, and two great clutches of the hand to go through, as soon as they saw he was there. Nothing could of course be said at such a time, but the father and brother were resolved to *show* at all events, their goodwill; the next day's sport must occupy their minds immediately afterwards, and dogs, coverts, and keepers be the staple of their conversation.

On such topics Simon could discourse till the hour of deliverance arrived. He and his friends were engaged to dine at Wancote on the following day, and he left, feeling that no worse thing could now befall him.

His friends had next to be apprised of his prospects. "Just settled, eh?" said one, with interest. "Really? We should have come too soon, on Saturday, then?"

"'Jove, you are a lucky fellow!" cried the other. "'Jove, you are! Everything so handy. You run down here, cross in a jiffy, up the other side, and nobody the wiser! Which is the finer place of the two, 'Jove, I don't know! What woods, what coverts you have on every side! And Miss Manners is all that's charming, Lutteridge; so, between ourselves, is her sister. Not the married one, but the little, smart, look-alive thing who rattled the teacups. 'Jove, how she chaffed Cotterill! He seems an awfully good fellow, and took any amount of bullying."

"Cotterill went in for the quiet one, eh?" said the other. "That's always the way. Fellows laugh and chaff with the jolly girls, but they spoon the quiet ones."

"I don't think my cousin Hester," said Lutteridge, with an effort, "is exactly of the genus jolly girl."

"Not at all; of course not. An awfully nice, pretty little thing. I lost my heart as well as Whately, I can tell you. Oh, if I were anything but a pauper, how many places at once my poor heart would be found in! But the other sisters are deuced quiet, you know. No offence, Lutteridge; I call Miss Manners quite unexceptionable, only, as was highly correct, she had no eyes for any one but you."

"You have bespoken the beauty of the family," struck in Captain Whately. "'Jove, you have! Mrs Cotterill has not much looks to speak of, and our young friend—Hall's and mine—has not the presence of Miss Manners.

She—*your* Miss Manners—Lutteridge, has a rattling fine figure—'Jove, she has!"

"It is as hard as steel can make it," said Simon, to himself. "And her heart is as cold as the same. And my little Hester has the softest waist, and the sweetest lips—but she is only a cousin, and the other is *my* Miss Manners! You were very gay this afternoon, Hetty; I heard your voice prattling away in the corner, just as it used to do. Somehow, to my ear, though, there was a want. I can tell what that meant; no man thinks a girl's laugh so pleasant to another as to himself. Dear child, it must have been a relief to her to feel that my ghost was laid at last. I have haunted her pretty continuously of late; but she will think now that it was all for Agatha's sake. And this time, yesterday, I was free!"

A sigh so profound could not but cause a laugh, and he had to stand their laugh most of the way home.

"But, 'Jove, I say," confided Whately to his companion, afterwards, "all the same he looks as if he were going to be hung! Eh?"

"Hooked?"

"Hum! Perhaps. I don't know. They are

as good as he. 'Jove, though, something is not straight! Contingent difficulties, eh?"

"Not his style. However, all things are possible. Hang me if I would not present a decent appearance of satisfaction on such an occasion, at all events! Whenever he forgets we are by, the poor fellow sighs as if his heart would break. What can the screw loose be?"

Whately shrugged his shoulders.

"Is he gone to bed now?" pursued Hall.

"Yes. Good idea. 'Jove, I'll go too! Good night."

"Good night."

But no one had any cause to complain of Simon's behaviour at Wancote. He did not go there on the following day until evening, but when he did, his part was played in a manner that left no room for censure. He was taciturn, it is true, but that he always had been—there was no change of any sort visible on his countenance. From this time it became his habit to take up a fixed position in the room as soon as he entered, and maintain it till he left. He seldom went to the house by day, alleging an excuse which even the ladies of Wancote regarded as all-sufficient — the abundance of his partridges; but he dined there every evening after the departure of his friends, unless invited elsewhere; and no one dreamed of the relief it was to him, when Constance's arrival at the Manor made such daily engagements uncourteous. Even had they desired to have her equally often, she would not have cared to have gone, and they did not make the request.

"Have Constance more here!" cried Sir John, when it was suggested by his eldest daughter. "If you once begin with that, there will be no end to it. You will never be able to call this house your own if once that woman gets a footing. She shall *not* come oftener. No, she shan't. Simon may come as much as he likes, but I won't have Constance."

"We only thought she might expect it, papa; that she would hardly like to be left alone so often."

"Then he need not leave her so often; tell him that you won't expect it. He might come once or twice in the week or so," said Sir John, not altogether averse to such an arrangement.

"Simon is a gloomy sort of fellow," he confided to Jem. "I had no idea he was that kind of man until after this engagement. He does not help our evenings at all."

"Don't say so to Agatha."

"Of course I shan't say so to Agatha; I know better than that. And he may come every day of his life if he likes, and she likes. It will not be for long, anyway. But what I mean is, does it not strike you that when he was up here and about with us as he was last year, he used to be more cheerful—pleasanter? I don't know what it is, but somehow I have got to feel about him again as I did when he first came home. He is a perfect dead-weight upon me. Mamma feels it too. I was talking about Simon being so dull," explained he, as his wife came in at the moment.

"He certainly is not improved in loquacity," replied she. "But I see no other falling off. He has been pressing Agatha this very day to have the marriage soon."

"That does not make him a more lively companion of an evening," said Sir John, not following her train of thought. "I have no doubt he finds plenty to say to Agatha—that is not the point. What I complain of is that way he has of stand, standing from hour to hour with his head down, as if he were going through a martyrdom; and then all at once, when he thinks it is time to go, he bolts off in a prodigious hurry. I am sure I for one am always glad when he is gone."

"Glad when he is gone!"

"Pooh! You know what I mean. I have nothing to say against himself; it is only that kill-joy phiz of his that is a regular damper upon everybody—a death's-head at the banquet."

This of Simon! Lady Manners felt aghast at the words, all the more that she had herself perceived the altered demeanour, which bore out Sir John's assertions.

Could it be that he was weary of Agatha—disappointed in her? Or was it not more probable that the man's nature, now released from the stimulus of uncertainty and desire to please, had sunk back into its habitual sombre taciturnity? She hoped so. It was a pity, but it was certainly a small matter as compared with the first supposition.

Since Agatha did not mind, since she apparently found no fault, it was not for any of them to hold up to view or even to discuss among themselves more than they could help, his shortcomings. Herbert, they all felt, had improved on acquaintance: his first manner could bear no comparison with that of Colonel Lutteridge; but he was such a good-tempered, obliging, unselfish husband, such a perfect son-in-law and brother-in-law, that they were fain to acknowledge that Jane had shown her usual judgment in the selection.

There was no doubt about Jane's happiness. Her countenance beamed whenever Herbert came near. She was not only fond of him, she was proud of him, and of being his wife. "You have no idea how clever he is," she said one day. "He reads all the great debates, and he makes me read them too. And he is very highly thought of by both his uncles, I assure you. The one who is in India—the judge—wrote me such a letter about him; and his father often asks for Herbert's opinion about the estate. *I* had no idea how much he knew before."

"And Janie never was our best head either," said her mother. "We did not expect her to find a very learned husband."

"But, mamma, he is much more learned than you think," for Lady Manners had smiled. "I know a great many people have told me how well he did at school; and he has a number of prizes, and he once thought of going into the Church!"

"Indeed? My dear Jane, he is much better fitted to be an otter-hunter."

"He is not an otter-hunter now, mamma; he has given it up. I see you don't believe me, but it is quite true all that I have told you. None of you understand Herbert."

Jane, in dudgeon, was too diverting, especially as the complaint was seen as usual in its mildest form. For three minutes she looked pettish, then she exclaimed, "You are all gone off to Simon!" then she laughed at herself. The idea was of course disclaimed, Herbert was extolled to the skies, and harmony was restored all round.

END OF VOL. II.

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